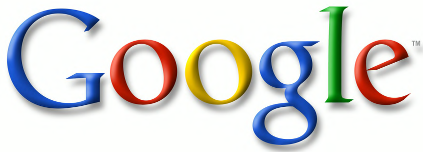

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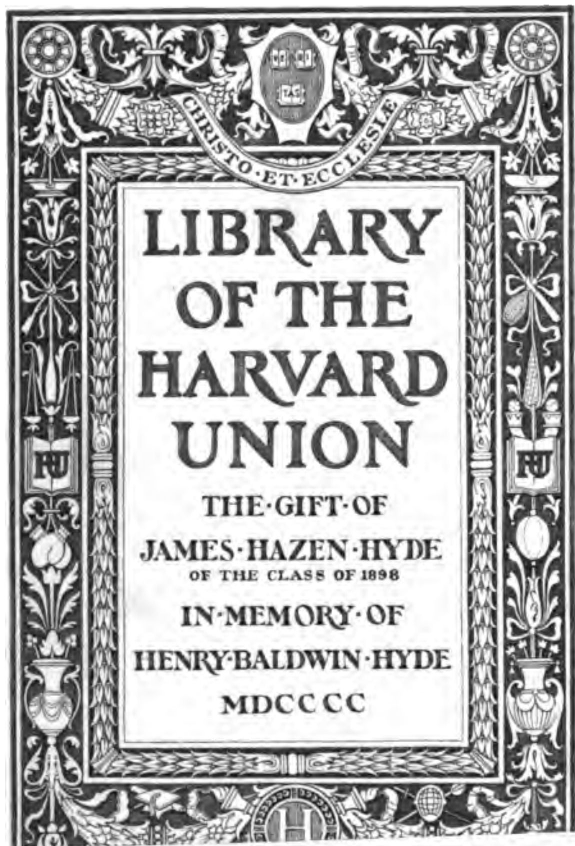

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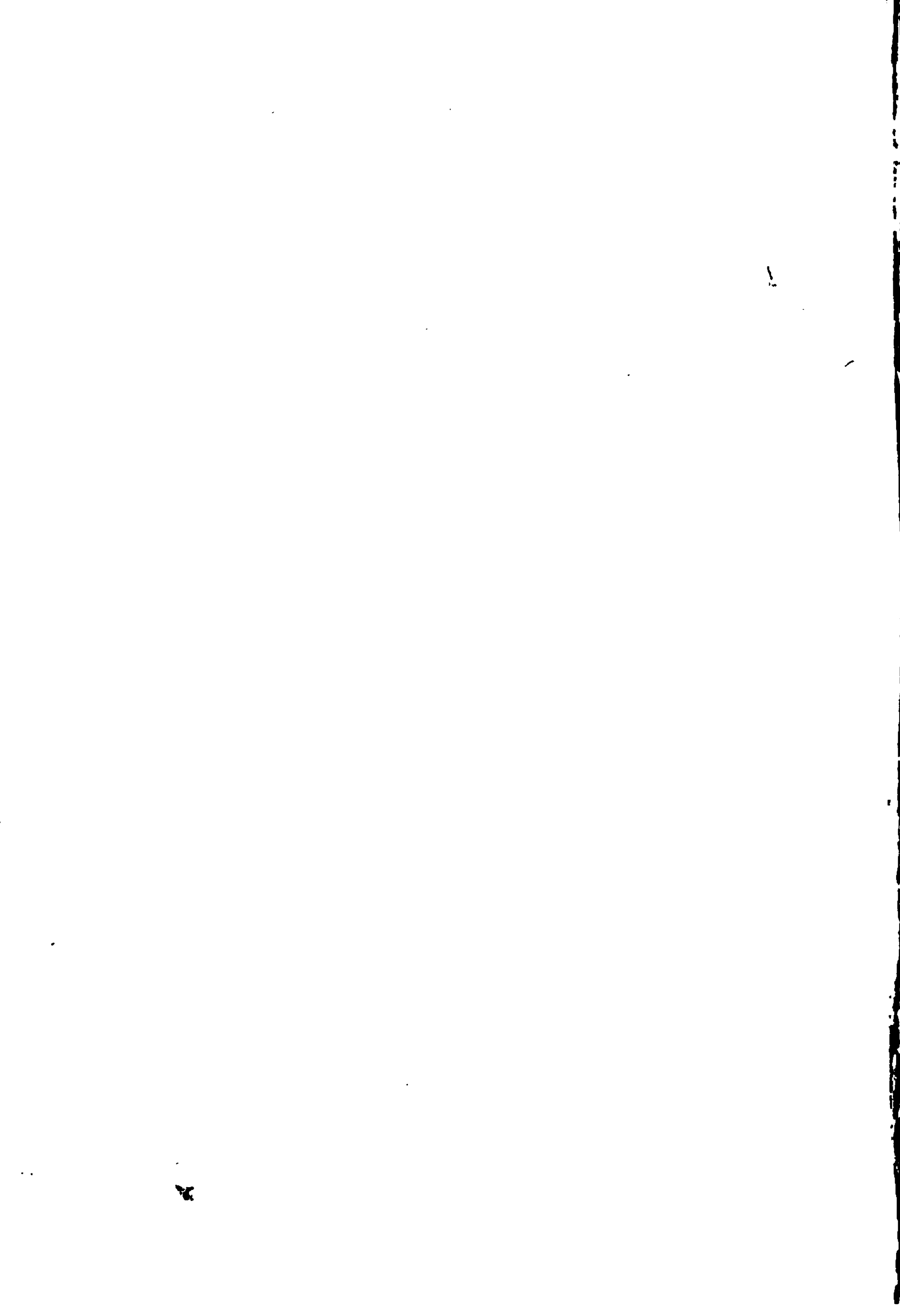

BROKE OF COVENDEN

BROKE OF COVENDEN

By

J. C. SNAITH

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CHAPTER I

Presents an English Gentleman in the Bosom of his Family

MR. BROKE of Covenden had for the enlightenment of his middle life one son and six daughters. The son had learned already to live beyond his income like a gentleman: he had been in the Blues nearly a year. He was one of those seductive fellows whose frank laugh re-echoes among the hollows of his understanding. His tailor was the most expensive in London; his clubs the most exclusive; his friends the most numerous; and although he was much too patrician to pay his bills, all the world deemed it an honour to serve him. Nature had deemed it an honour as well. She had formed his hands and feet, polished his skin, and turned his features with such fastidious care that could Reason have been induced to take one of these external parts to be her seat, he would have had his pedestal in any gallery of the Sculptor's art. Connoisseurs were agreed, however, and among them you would count his mother, that the upper storey had been somewhat primitively modelled for the work to be a masterpiece. This, however, was not a disability, because Perfection has a habit of acquiring caste at the expense of the higher graces.

The daughters had been educated in a Spartan manner. In the technical metaphor of their uncle Charles, "The little chestnut fillies had been broken to harness before they had their teeth." This was one of the many privileges they owed to the foresight of their mamma, that austere lady, whose wisdom taught her that girls without money could not afford to keep minds of their own—until they

were married, that was. A glance at their noses, one and all of the uncompromising design of their race, at their clear and candid eyes, at the honest blood mantling in their cheeks, and you would have seen that here was a team to be trusted. Indeed, they never failed to respond to the hand, and would have trotted prettily, without blinkers, over the face of a precipice had that course been deemed expedient by the president of their destinies. For the lady who stood towards them in that relation had been a blind and arbitrary Providence since they could crawl in the nursery. Had it ever been necessary to make them quail, she was the one person in the world who had the requisite knowledge and power.

Their father was their friend and slave. In all that pertained to his name his pride was invincible. And these lusty creatures, wearing the stamp of Broke without embellishment, were as priceless in his eyes as the acres that had bred them, and the pedigree that had evoked their being. They were inalienable blood-stock; their names were in the book. Their mother, whose business it was to represent their qualities to the world, might smile in her suave manner to confess that they had not a penny apiece to their *dot*; that their looks had all foregathered in their ridiculous noses; that the sum and assemblance of their minds was paltry; that their accomplishments ended and began in a knowledge of horse, certainly the friend of man but hardly the encyclopaedia; and how she was to find the right people for them she did not know, seeing that their horoscopes had been cast in the days of extreme competition, when every girl was equipped with beauty, wit, a nasal accent, or a million sterling. And there were phenomena, as the newspapers were never tired of telling her, who had all these gifts in one.

Their father would hear no complaints of them, however. If any house in any country could boast purer symbols of the soil, he was a Dutchman! With his great guffaw would he vow; and if there was a suspicion of vainglory in it, you must never forget he was a signal member of his nation, that he would not have them otherwise by so much as a hair. They were Brokes, every clean inch of them, out-

side and inside, top to toe; he would ask what they wanted with good looks and accomplishments and the fal-lals of the middle-classes? No, they were straight ash-sticks, not over graceful if you liked, not particularly supple, but tough, hardy, full of fibre—tenacious saplings from a tree that had withstood the ravages of time since time had had a name.

At eight o'clock on the morning of the seventeenth birthday of his youngest daughter, under whose inauspicious star we begin our story, Broke having fortified his household with prayer, an act he undertook every day at that hour with a sacred punctuality born of the occasion, sat at the breakfast table in the society of his wife. They were alone. A slight heightening of Mrs. Broke's suavity told the attendant ministers that the world this morning was amiss. The mellifluous accents in which she asked the butler to hand some buttered toast made the fact too clear. The redoubtable six daughters of the house had missed family prayers, were late for breakfast. The offence was grave. Whatever the cause, an account would have to be rendered. Antiquity could furnish no instance of the ways of that establishment being ignored. The laws of the excellent Medes and Persians might alter; the Greek Kalends might arrive; the earth might run against the sun, but eight o'clock was the hour at which they sounded the gong at Covenden Hall.

Mrs. Broke was a superb disciplinarian, and born to organize. She ordered her household like a camp. Von Moltke himself, that pattern of a scientist, could not have handled his armies with a sterner precision than she her domestics and her daughters. Chance did not enter. She put her faith in God and kept her powder dry in the true sense of that prime military axiom. She recommended herself to Providence by a vigilance of the most perfect kind. Waste there was not; neglect was unknown. In the course of a year she reclaimed the pittance of a younger son by force of management. Indeed, if Broke had not rejoiced in the possession of one of this salutary spirit to trim his affairs, foreign and domestic, the ever-impending crash must have fallen on his ears long before the period at which we find him.

She was a notable person even in the day of the emancipation of her sex, an outstanding example of the "wholesome mind in the wholesome body," a very culmination of the qualities that make for virtue, a *beau idéal* of British motherhood among a people so divinely practical. But she was something more. Wherever we find a mellow laughter at the world we must seek for disillusion. Her accents would have taught you that she had known how to look at life. She had achieved, for her sex, the somewhat gross feat of viewing it with the naked eye. The audacious operation had not unsexed her, incredible as it may appear. Her mind had hardly surrendered a feather of its femininity in a behaviour so unladylike. There was no affectation in her of standing in horror before her own hardihood; no parade of the fact that her daring was ineffably shocking. That her fibres had coarsened a little she would have been the first to confess, but was not that the penalty for looking at the ugly thing? The gazers on the Gorgon did not get off so easily.

It was a privilege to see her at table in a morning gown without any decoration whatever. There was capability stamped on every line of that placid exterior. There was also dignity; those urbane reserves; that unembarrassed candour; that invincible suavity of voice and mien so indispensable to a woman of the world. This animated serenity was always there. It was extended to her family as unfailingly and with the same liberality as to members of the Cabinet and persons accredited to the Court of St. James's when they took her in to dinner in town. Secretly her daughters dreaded it. In the obscurity of their childlike hearts they could never mistrust it too much or fear it adequately. A cold twinkle in her blue eyes, like a star in a frosty January evening, made them shiver whenever they saw it. Their literal minds had long perceived steel beneath the velvet, a gauntlet of iron under the glove. Such immobility was a curtain, a mask: if only they could have counted on finding something real behind it, they might have learned to take their courage in their hands and tear it down. Writhing in their beds at night, the surface underneath the mask assumed so hard a polish that it shone in a permanent smile of deferential con-

descension. They saw themselves as Fatima, who pushed back the door of Blue Beard's secret room to find the reality worse than the surmise. But they paid for their cowardice by having to rest content with half the truth. The half they hungered for they had to go without.

A look of amused indulgence lurked in the corners of her mouth as she regarded the vacant places at the table.

"How busy the girls must be this morning! It is so unlike them to forget a meal!"

"They were not dancing last night?" Broke asked.

"Oh, no! They went to bed at half-past nine. I heard their voices on the lawn at six."

"Porson had better keep the bacon and coffee hot, anyhow."

"Pray do not trouble, Porson," said Mrs. Broke, as the hand of the august old gentleman, the butler, began to hover about the side-table.

She rose herself, removed the cover of the bacon dish and lifted the lid of the coffee-pot to afford their contents every facility for getting cold.

"Pity they are so late," she remarked, pouring milk into a saucer and placing it at the disposal of a cat that was rubbing itself about her ankles.

They ate their toast in silence. Broke was soon entrenched behind the *Standard* newspaper, an operation he conducted patiently every morning in the year. His fidelity to our national organ was so unswerving that when Sunday came he read the advertisements contained in the issue of the day before. The outlook of man and wife towards things and men could not have been more excellently poised than in their attitude towards this prop of the Constitution. In the eyes of Broke it was a virgin British newspaper, composed exclusively by gentlemen for the exclusive use of gentlemen; in the eyes of Mrs. Broke it took the place of *Punch*, the official and no less portentous engine of the national humour.

By the time our hero was immersed in entrancing details of the immemorial *bonhomie* of the members of the regnant family, as manifested in various places to all sorts and conditions of men the previous day, Mrs. Broke

had opened the more enticing of her letters. She could detect by instinct a bill or an advertisement whatever its blandishment of wrapper. The first she opened chanced to be a piece of cardboard in these terms: "The Lady Salmon at Home—Toplands—22nd February. Dancing 9 to 3." In the top corner it was endorsed, "The Honble. Mrs. Broke and party."

With her imperturbable meekness she contrived to get this document across the table and past the barrier of the *Standard* newspaper. Our hero lowered it for a moment and was seen to read. In the act he might also have been seen to be frowning heavily.

"Impertinence!" he said.

"A little uncompromising, are you not, my dear?"

"Not at all. Impertinence."

A whimsical little sigh escaped Mrs. Broke. It was also fond, like that of a mother who opens the nursery door and has her ears assailed with a tin trumpet blown by a petticoated son and heir who is making a furious circuit of the room with a tin sword, a paper helmet, and a wooden charger.

"You were not going to know those people, I understood."

"Will nothing induce you to surrender a little to the age, my love?"

She purred like the cat who had already lapped its milk.

"I—ah, don't see what the age has got to do with it. It makes those people no better. It makes them worse."

Mrs. Broke pursed her mouth wooingly. She was an oppressively plain woman, yet with all the physical wiles of a professional beauty.

"If this were the age of idealism there might be an objection even to a Jewish financier. But since it is that of Mammon, the sons of Benjamin are our deities."

"I—ah, deny that it is the age of Mammon as you call it."

"Then you become Don Quixote at once. You remember how the Knight of La Mancha insisted on chivalry in an age that had become prosaic. He remained a knightly figure against the advice of his friends, at a great deal of personal inconvenience. And we must not forget that

because he ran a-tilt at his time and got nothing more profitable than a broken head for his pains, the world has not yet done laughing at him. My dear, your environment appears to be exciting the same heroical frenzy in you; yet if you butt at it, however thick your dear old John Bull poll may be, you will find that a poultice made out of vinegar and perhaps the *Standard* newspaper is the only laurel that will crown it. That would be grotesque."

"Humbug, radical humbug!"

"Seek, my love, to develop your sense of the absurd."

"I have too much. I wonder what those people take us for!"

"It is not what they take us for, it is what we are. When we have ceased to deceive others, is it not time we gave up striving to deceive ourselves?"

"I—ah, don't quite follow."

"We must come off the high horse, my love. The noble quadruped is a little obsolete. Besides, have we not lost something of the art of sitting it? The people laugh."

"Why, I don't know."

"There are a thousand reasons. Many of them humiliating, sordid, vulgar."

"Money I—ah, suppose."

Our hero spoke with the reluctance of intellectual effort.

"You are wise to make that admission."

"I—ah, make no admission. We may be rather hard up, but we have managed to rub along without Tom, Dick and Harry until now, and I—ah, don't see why we should not continue."

Mrs. Broke shook her head at him archly. There was something indulgent too. Here was the whetstone on which every morning she sharpened her gift.

Before either side might advance farther towards a pleasant controversy that generally arose between them twice a week, our hero's heavy face lightened to a look of interest. Voices sounded across the lawn. Raised in laughter and execitement, they were clear and ringing, of a bell-like timbre, to be heard a long way off. Within a minute the girls poured in through the French window of the room in which their father and mother sat.

There was a singular uniformity in one and all. Six

peas in the same pod could not have had a quainter resemblance to one another. Their alikeness made them absurdly difficult to tell apart. They had an air of being made according to regulation. Every small detail of them seemed to be fashioned strictly after some arbitrary pattern which had been sanctioned by expert authority, like service tunics or policemen's boots or helmets. This could not be said to make for beauty, any more than do the points in dogs and horses, except in the eyes of those educated to the technicalities. The verdict of the world, that scrupulous embodiment of the obvious, was that they were decidedly plain, not to say ugly. Connoisseurs in curves, in captivating hues, in titillating undulations had no hesitation whatever in making a little humorous shrug of protest in turning away their eyes.

The only compliment you could pay them positively was that they were beautifully clean. It was a quality that had a pathos in it, for it is negative, in women painfully; and here it was accentuated with a cruel sharpness by their old and rude and shabby and misshapen clothes. Their old straw hats encircled by weather-stained black ribbons, were eloquent in testimony that more than one summer and winter had beaten over them; their boots were thick and clumsy; their short skirts flopped about gaunt ankles. Physically they had nothing to overcome and carry off their clothes. They drooped dankly on their lean flanks. Small and thin, with a greyhound's spareness of limb, finely suggestive of an outdoor life and animal condition, they were much too wiry and fine-drawn for feminine enchantments. "Hard-bitten beggars," their father called them.

In colour they were as the doe; and healthy as the wind. In their faces was the keen wistfulness of the foxhound, but this did nothing to mitigate their plainness. The austere features of their mother, unredeemed by tact and animation, would not have been so hopeless, for raised in the midst of each countenance was an obstacle hers had not to contend against. Their keenly chiselled faces, thrown into bas-relief by the remarkable arch of an hereditary nose, they were only saved from the grotesque by a sheer miracle of historical association. This object was

doubtless a famous talisman; but a woman who was sensitive would not have had to look much beyond it to find tragedy. It was the boast of him who cherished them most fondly that there was not a trace of self-consciousness about them, but there was one at least, whom fate had called on to support this feature, to whom Cyrano de Bergerac was a figure about whose devoted head a heart-moving pathos played.

Still, however, there were those who were not afraid to praise. For if in women there is health added to vivid youth, to which is superadded that saving quality that goes by the name of breeding, the mysterious aroma savouring of nature and the soil, like the bouquet in wine, a little rumination on the sex will sometimes evolve merit where you would look to find it least. Much depends upon the courtesy of the beholder, but tolerably lenient verdicts have been given by kindly persons upon a grotesquerie no less than theirs. Many a half-protesting and half-apologetic portrait was furnished of them by the indulgent people with whom they were brought in contact. They were likened now to clean-bred horses, now to Belvoir entry; but, as usual, their uncle Charles transcended all in profusion of alliteration and boldness of imagery. His dictum to his sister was: "Those little fillies are like that bow-legged bull-bitch o' mine—a dam' sight too full of breed. You'll never marry 'em, Jane, any more than my little bitch will ever get a prize at the show. They don't know what's what nowadays. They've lost the knack of judgin'."

As they streamed in through the open window, bearing the February hoar on their shoes and coats and in their hair, they looked six of the straightest, cleanliest animals that ever exulted in liberty. There was a scuffle for their father's greeting. They clustered around him the six as one, and all took part in vigorous manœuvres about his chair, for this was an open competition permitted even by their remarkable decorum. It would have been a fault in honour to submit without protest to the second place. Their mother was spared this ordeal. With one of her dignity, whatever the condescension with which it was girt about, such a behaviour would have landed them in the incongruous at once. One by one they approached her

lukewarm coffee made with water. Their appetites were of that supreme quality, however, to which all fare comes as meat and drink. They flinched from nothing, nor did they pause to discriminate. An ox roasted whole and truffles in aspic were to them identical. Their summary methods with a meal that was enough to make a civilized digestion shudder, drew a smile from their mother, a somewhat weary one, it must be confessed, for a woman so redoubtable. The charge had been hurled at them by their celebrated aunt Emma of "unfeminine robustness." "One thinks of pigs at a trough, my dear Jane," she had said in a moment of inspired delicacy.

"The meet's at half-past eleven," said their father, "up at the Grove."

"Of course, father."

They nodded sagely across the coffee-cups with their mouths full.

"Whose turn to-day?"

This question gave a new lease to excitement, verging on uproar. Their tongues were unloosed again, and ran riot for a moment in something approaching internecine strife. Their father cried, "Chair! Chair!" and tapped the bowl of his pipe on the table. Their obedience was so sudden as to be a little ludicrous. The loudest voice was quelled by the word of authority. Such discipline was the fruit of centuries, no doubt. They were descended on both sides from generations of warriors accustomed to obey and to be obeyed.

"Now then, Joan, who rides?"

"We don't know, father," said his eldest daughter, with a countenance of much perplexity. "The Doctor put his foot in a rabbit hole last week and strained his off fore-leg. Simkin says we can't have him out for a fortnight. And Whitenose has got a hot hough, and Robin has been coughing in the night."

"H'm—unfortunate. Still, settle it somehow."

These sportswomen, to have recourse again to the technicality of their uncle Charles, the master of the pack, "Six days a-weekers every one," had to have their privileges regulated on a fixed principle. There was a limit to their stable. In the height of the season, if stress

of weather did not intervene to give their hunters a rest, they either had to set particular fixtures apart for this purpose, or submit to be mounted four at a time, while the two remaining did what they could with their bicycles. The accident to The Doctor, and the precarious condition of Whitenose and Robin had made it imperative that a third should forego her claims to the appropriate mode. One and all were much too keen, however, to waive them lightly. Jane and Harriet retired by rotation, but none of the more fortunate four could be brought to see that perfect equity was consistent with self-sacrifice. Besides. is it not pre-eminently English to insist on your rights as an individual if you ever happen to possess any?

It was precisely here, for the first time in the history of the house, that anarchy, the modern canker, showed a disposition to rear its horrid head in an ancient virgin government.

"Perhaps we might have one of the bays for to-day," said Delia in a tentatively timid manner. She blushed to hear her own voice in public. Alone in that august assembly the hardihood seemed too immense. But it is only timidity that can acquire a particular kind of boldness. The next instant she was blushing still more.

Her sisters had turned five faces as one of an amazed disapproval towards her. They put down their coffee cups and stared at her with round eyes of resolute wonder. On three counts at least her guilt was enormous. In the first place she had no right to an opinion on a subject of any kind, much less to have the effrontery to utter it before their father. Again, if she had had a right, the privilege of uttering it in that august assembly was wholly precluded by her extreme youth—she was a year younger than Jane and Margaret, and four years younger than Joan, a pair of twins intervening. And, most heinous offence of all, she had been guilty of an idea! How such a silly, inoffensive little kid had come by such a dangerous implement they could not guess. And she dared to show it off before her father!

In a painful silence they waited while Joan, the one having authority, and always their natural leader by an inimitable force of character, proceeded to clear her mouth of bacon

before proceeding to clear the mind of the childish Delia of cant.

"It does not seem right," said that formidable young person in a tone as exquisitely detached as that of aunt Emma herself, "to ride to hounds on a carriage horse. It seems like making a pretence of doing what you cannot. If one is not to be with hounds, I think one ought to go on a bicycle. Besides, we have not been used to it."

The others chimed in solemnly to crush their youngest sister with their grave accord. It was a terrible disgrace for her, before their father too, poor little kid! but your truly Spartan nature does not flinch from the administration of punishment, even when it is likely to recoil on those who wield the rod. But it was left to their father himself to lay on the severest stroke.

"I think you are right, Joan," he said with a gravity as magisterial as their own. "It is a fine point, but I endorse your view. Not that it matters, of course, but personally I—ah, think it can be considered. It has not struck me in that light before, but now it is pointed out the spirit is sound. Of course you can go on anything with four legs to it, if you have not anything better, or are not used to—ah, anything better; but I think you are right if you don't. It may be drawing it a bit fine, but personally I—ah, think one cannot be too jealous for the—ah, dignity of covert."

This piece of dialectics, given in the judicial syllables of an admired Chairman of Quarter Sessions, thrilled five excited bosoms of those present in that court. There was a sixth—a sixth who had opened her mischievous blue eyes and was laughing softly, an incendiary whom fortunately neither the judge nor the jury, terribly in earnest as they were, could spare a thought to take notice of. Had they done so, she might have been ordered to retire. But the culprit herself was covered in confusion. Women are sensitive; and if they are not to tingle, it behoves the objects of their worship to acquire the art of dissenting from them delicately. That she had committed an awful solecism had been made clear to her, but she had no means of telling what it was. There was a subtle twist in her callow mind that forbade it to dis-

cern the banality in riding a carriage horse to hounds; and worse, the affront conceived to custom! Others rode any sort of horse, why not they? Probably it was a new idea to them; but to others it was not. Even her forehead was such a tawny scarlet that her father observed it. The next instant she was trembling under his great guffaw.

"My dear child," he said, with a grim chuckle, "you are not going to be a woman of ideas, are you? Not going to be a second Aunt Emma, eh, little girl? Must be careful, must be careful."

Delia nearly wept. That stroke cut very deep. Such an odious reference had never been made by their father before, although their mother had long known how to employ it. No more striking proof of the serious nature of the misdemeanour could have been adduced. The culprit redoubled her efforts to find wherein she had offended so signally. Like a captive bird she beat against the bars of the narrow cage of her intelligence; but she could not reach to the secret of her enormity. Yet whatever it might be, cunningly she tried to wipe out the stain by an act of public virtue.

"I will cycle to-day, Joan," she said. The scarlet was still burning at the roots of her hair.

"Indeed, no," said Joan. "That would not be fair. We would not ask it of you." There was an imperial snub in the impartial voice that made Delia too frightened to say another word.

In the end the question of who should ride horses and who should ride bicycles was submitted to him most fitted to decide it. As no method of escaping the *impasse* was vouchsafed to the feminine intelligence it was clearly a case for the higher court. Their faith in their father was most catholic. On the lightest or most abstruse point his word was law. He chose on this occasion, in the fashion of Solomon, to expound his wisdom by a mechanical means.

"Better draw lots."

It was Delia who was called upon to forfeit her claim. No less was to be expected of that inexorable Destiny which never forgets to punish, although not so conscientious in the matter of reward. Surely it was just that

she who had dared to suggest a carriage-horse should be condemned by Circumstance masquerading in the livery of Chance to an even ruder form of locomotion. Poor little kid, on her birthday too! Still it was no part of the duties of Destiny to recognize incongruities of that sort.

However, no sooner had all been contrived to their pleasure, and they had fallen to discussing the behaviour of the frost and the prospect of its going in time for hounds to do their work, than their mother interposed in that mild voice they had cause to know so well.

"I was rather hoping, children, that you would not hunt to-day. Do you think I could persuade you to do two or three hours' reading with me before luncheon? It might be of service to your minds, and I am sure your first wish is to improve them."

The faces of our six Dianas were poignant. Their consternation was complete. Their mother's smile grew in its expanse until the gold stopping was seen to glitter round a tooth in her upper jaw.

"As you were not present this morning at prayers, I feel sure that two or three hours' solid reading would help you to regain a little of that which you have unwittingly lost. I am sure we all agree with dear Aunt Emma when she says with an inimitable insight all her own, in one of the many pure and bloodless passages with which she has chastened the English language, "that a portion of the higher literature, German, Scandinavian or Chinese for preference, read aloud in the home morning or evening, or even in the middle of the day, or at any hour when one is not in bed, is to the animal spirit as a sedative, and to the understanding as is an iron tonic." Now, as your absence from prayers this morning seemed to imply that English literature had for the time being lost its savour for you, I shall be curious to see if the German philosophers—let us say Hegel—as I cannot implicitly trust you not to understand a word of him, Nietsche is out of the question—let us say Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion*, cannot stimulate your minds to acquire a renewed interest in the prose poetry of your native tongue."

Each stroke was dealt delicately by a past mistress in her art. The high mild voice, so caressing as to seem obsequious,

the air of deep maternal solicitude that put them back into the nursery at once, her winning grace, and, above all, the reference to the author of *Poses in the Opaque*, that *recherché* collection of essays whose publication was claimed by its admirers as marking an epoch in the world of taste, brought such a flush on their cheeks as nothing else could have done.

They had not a word to say in mitigation of sentence. To be sure they were no longer in the nursery, but their discipline remained a wonderful, a surpassing thing. They were physically incapable of questioning authority, even in its most arbitrary form. In silence they bowed their proud heads, and re-applied themselves to bacon. If there was a slightly moist softness in the eyes of Delia—and we must urge upon you respectfully that we are by no means certain even of that—you must remember that she was a full year the youngest of them all, and precisely by that length of time was less of a Broke than her sisters.

"I think you are a bit hard on them," said their father. "Anyhow they shall go to-morrow. But I don't think they will miss much; we never have much luck at the Grove. In '59, in '79, in '92 we drew it blank, and in '83 we found a mangy fox in it. Besides, I don't think this frost will clear off after all; and even if it does, the going will be beastly."

Such consolation, elaborate as it was, did not soften their pangs; but it was this sort of tenderness for them that made their father the finest comrade in the world. Not only was he a god and a hero, but a personal friend: a happy conjunction of qualities that argues a nature of an almost paradoxical scope. Reverence seldom goes with familiarity, as you know. The deities are said to be austere.

However, at this painful moment, when there was no more bacon left on the dish and only grains in the coffee-pot, when therefore the only alleviation that was possible was put away, a diversion was created by the opening of the door, and the announcement—

"Lord Bosket."

CHAPTER II

A Matrimonial Martyr on the Tragic Theme

AN odd little man waddled in. His legs were so crooked with addiction to the saddle that he looked as painfully out of his element in a pedestrian mode as a mariner on dry land. His face and head were as bald as a toad's—the Sieur de Montaigne's, if the Sieur had not had a little moustache. The colour of his skin, empurpled by the wind and rain, was that of an overripe tomato; not only brave in good living and the open air, but with also a shine of wassail in it, a puffy lustre that enhanced the bloom of his complexion while it blurred the ferret-like sharpness of his face. His somewhat debased features were suffused with melancholy, partly querulous and partly humorous. It lent him a slightly whimsical air, which seemed to imply that he had the habit of looking at life with his own peculiar eyes. He was as one who acquiesces in his lot against his judgment, yet shrinks to seek another lest, so poor is his opinion of himself and the world in general, he should find a worse. In his teeth was a straw; in his hunting scarf an enormous pin cast in the device of a fox; a fur-lined greatcoat was thrown back to display his pink, and as he waddled in twirling his velvet cap on the end of his whip it was not easy for any save the specialist in the fine shades of gentility to discern where the groom ended and the gentleman began.

"Mornin'," he said, with a large gesture that embraced one and all in a manner that was at once the perfection of the affectionate and the casual. "How are my little cockyoly birds this mornin'? Pert as robins, and as sharp

as hawks! Peckin' are they; noses in the manger? Toppin' up with porridge and bacon and a bit o' marmalade? What, no marmalade! Here, my boy, the marmalade *at* once."

While this commodity was being procured, he wagged his head and muttered, "*Must* have marmalade," in various keys. On its appearance he examined it as critically as a bushel of oats he was about to give a favourite mare, and set out on a tour of the table, dabbing a huge spoonful on the plate of each of his nieces, ending with Delia, upon whom he bestowed "one extry for little Miss Muffit."

"And what's the matter with her finger?"

"A badger has bitten it, Uncle Charles," said Delia with great pride.

"A *badger* has bitten it. Lord-love-a-duck! Dig badgers and ichthyo-what-do-you-call-ems out o' the back garden, I suppose?"

"Out of the spinney, Uncle Charles," they chimed together.

An equally animated and incoherent account of the great event was furnished for this indulgent person.

"We'll be diggin' out foxes in about two-twos," said he, when at last he could get in a word. "We shall have the sun before you can say 'Knife!' The goin' is on the hard side at present, but wait a bit and it will be all right."

Somehow this announcement fell flat. His nieces failed to beacon in response, which they did invariably, no less being demanded of them by him and that particular topic. A reaction to his optimism was provoked at once. He was only half sensible of it, to be sure, but it was sufficient to urge him to fly to the specific for his temperament.

"Porson," he said, glancing about querulously. "Where's Porson, confounded old man! Why don't you bring me that whisky and soda, you stoopid ole feller?"

"I beg your lordship's pardon."

Already the butler was toddling towards him with a tray of spirits and syphons. The specific had not been ordered; but as at the moment of entry of Lord Bosket into the house of his brother-in-law it was usually his first act to call for it, experience had taught Porson to take time by the forelock.

Measuring out one half-pennyworth of soda water to an intolerable deal of whisky, Lord Bosket dispatched the mixture in a consummate manner with one jerk of the hand. He shut his eyes, and then re-opened them slowly in an exercise of the critical faculty.

"Good water," he said earnestly. "*Very* good water, but the whisky's rotten. Funny thing, I never come into this house but what I have to lodge an objection. It ought to be brought before the Stewards. Sort of thing that gets the house a bad name. The whisky's raw; get me some turpentine to cool my tongue. Have this in the keg?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Keep it in the wood?"

"Yes, my lord."

"'Straordinary thing! Do you buy it or do they pay you to take it away?"

"I beg your lordship's pardon, but this came from Hipsley with your lordship's compliments as a Christmas gift."

"What—what—what—what—what?"

Lord Bosket querulously placed his hand behind his ear. The patient manner in which Porson repeated his statement was no mean piece of elocution.

"You must be wrong my boy, you must be wrong."

"I have the label, my lord."

"Then send that whisky back and tell Paling you are to have a keg of the 'special,' with the green ticket, and mind you look at the bung. Ask Paling what he means by it. God bless my soul, what are things coming to?"

This urgent matter being at last adjusted to Lord Bosket's satisfaction he turned an eye of petulant inquiry upon his nieces.

"Which of you little fillies has got a birthday this mornin'?"

Delia lifted shy eyes up to him.

"Oh, it's the young one is it! May I ask what's your fancy, miss?"

"If you please, Uncle Charles, I should like a horse," said Delia with an air that was very timid but also very decisive.

"You would like a hoss. 'Straordinary how great minds think alike. It happens, miss, that a hoss is just what I've brought you."

"Oh, Uncle Charles!" said Delia, with a sudden heightening of colour.

"A pretty little hoss for a pretty little lady. And manners—well, I wish your Aunt Emma would take a pattern. Pretty bit o' stuff."

"You ought not to do it, Charles," said Broke. "How many more are you going to give them?"

"What do you know about it, my boy? If now and then I can't find a mount for my own fillies it's a pity. What have you got to do with it? They are the only ones I've got and all with a weakness for good cattle same as me. Going to hunt the fox this mornin'—eh, gells? We shall have you larking over those fences. Hallo, there comes Mr. Sun! What did I say! Nobody'll know there's been a frost in another hour. Saw Padgett as I came up. He says the varmints are as thick in the spinney as eels in a mill dam. We'll have 'em out o' that. They shall put their best pads first this mornin', curse their little eyes!"

But for once his nieces failed to respond to his enthusiasm. As a rule eager faces greeted the lightest allusion of this kind, but to-day even their interest seemed perfunctory. He looked at them, and then at their mother with his eye of whimsical inquiry.

"They *are* coming, Jane?"

"Not to-day, Charles," said his sister in her mild accents.

"Wh-a-a-at?"

Lord Bosket removed the straw from his mouth with extraordinary resolution.

"I am sincerely sorry, Charles," said his sister, with a demure mischief in her eyes.

"Sorry be damned. Are they goin' to do five-finger exercises, or are they goin' to play hockey?"

"They hope to read a little German philosophy with me this morning."

Lord Bosket returned the straw to his mouth with a resolution even more extraordinary than that with which he had taken it out.

human reason, even when dispensed by man, the fount of it, was not likely to prevail. Besides, you do not look to Hannibal to usurp the functions of the drill-sergeant. Therefore he was content to restrict his championship of the cause so gallantly espoused by Lord Bosket to grim laughter, enunciated in occasional guffaws, at the points made by that intrepid sportsman.

"German philosophy," he said, thrusting his hands in his pockets and growing quite querulous in his earnestness. "I thought you were a woman o' sense, Jane, but you are a stable companion to Emma. Part of the 'Movement,' what? Haven't heard o' the 'Movement'? Don't know what the 'Movement' is? It's the *very* latest. As it's German you'll go to a sausage shop to study it of course, now that the missis has proved Shakespeare to be Bacon, and reads *Othello* in a pigstye to preserve the tradition of environment. That's the ticket, 'the tradition of environment.' She walks into my snuggery to study *Paradise Lost*. That's a nice way to treat a feller; I've always been a good husband to her. I told her to go to the devil and she would be able to read Dante. If you are in the 'Movement' and you happen to have got a cold in the head, you read aloud Nietsche to your pals. You pronounce his name every time you sneeze. There's no sayin' what we're comin' to. But it's a one-sided life. I can't even have a second-hand motor car, but, bless you, the missis has ordered a bran-new air-ship 'to converse alone with lofty thoughts.'"

"*Noblesse oblige*, my dear Charles. A soaring intellect may occasionally be allowed to pay a flying visit to its native ether."

"Soarin' intellect be damned. I've got a soarin' intellect, only it ain't allowed to soar. I've got my feelin's the same as any other worm. Writin' men are bad enough, but writin' women are a curse. Now they've made her the president of the 'Lady Lionesses,' sort of inner circle of the 'Movement,' don't you know; she believes she's Doctor Johnson, and her head's so big that Spink has had to build her a new tiara, because the old 'un has got so small it ain't fit to go to Court."

"Poor Emma! But I always understood, my dear Charles, that she desired no earthly crown."

"So she says, but she's got one all the same, as there don't seem to be one vacant in heaven. But that makes no odds; it wasn't paid for by me; it was in advance of royalties. But I'm leadin' a very hard life. Nobody knows what I have to put up with. One of her latest fakes is a 'Salon.' Don't you know what a 'Salon' is? Haven't you heard of a 'Salon'? Fellers who don't cut their hair, and fellers who have no hair to cut are always spendin' Saturday to Monday with us now. What would you do, Edmund, if you found fat poets with curly hair, and thin poets with dank locks sprawlin' all over the place writin' sonnets to the eyebrow of your missis? I don't like it; it's a rotten system. And why they can't write them at home if they have a home, or in a public house, or in a private asylum, or why they need trouble to write 'em at all, I don't know. 'Charles, you are deficient in soul,' says the missis. 'You've got no aesthetic perception, Charles. Charles, you are given over to the brute,' et cetera; and all the time these sportsmen in their willow pattern waistcoats are lowering their eyelids at you and sticking out their chins, and making you feel that you are takin' an unpardonable liberty to be on the earth at all."

"My poor Charles! Our withers are unwrung."

"Their necks are at present, but they mustn't drive a feller too far. I shall not stand much more, I'll give you my word. I'll let 'em see whether I am master in my own house, or whether I am not. I know I am a pretty low down sort o' man, I am; but when the missis writes on parchment and calls herself a Greek, and when she jumps out of bed in the middle of the night to hunt for 'the right word,' I tell you, Edmund, I give in. Personally, I am not what you call a gifted feller, but I don't have to hunt for it, my boy. Between you and me, life's a game that's not worth playin' nowadays. You get laughed at if you put an aitch in *Homer* now; and when you were at school you got smacked if you left it out. Emma says that Homer didn't write his own works. She says a feller of the name of Fitzsimmons wrote 'em. I asked her the other day, just to make a bit of high-class conversation for

her don't you know, whether this Fitzsimmons was any relation to the cove who fought Jim Corbett, because he must have come of a damned smart stock to have written *Homer* and books of that class. But, bless you, the old dutch was at me before you could say 'knife!' I was not to expose my Philistinism; and I was interpenetrated with the lust of athleticism, like the immoral age in which I lived. Fine talker that woman. And the poets said 'hee-haw.'"

"Alas, poor Yorick. If you will let me write the *Sorrows of a M. F. H.* I believe I can keep the pot boiling for a year."

"The mornin' I married that woman there might well be a change in the weather. Edmund, there's been a mistake. Jane and I ought to have been born the other way about. You and I would ha' got on together like a house on fire. We'd be huntin' the fox all day and playing double-dummy bridge all night; while Jane and Emma could be sittin' in a Methodist chapel all the year round readin' the *Spectator*. There's been a mistake, old son. It would ha' been such a simple thing for that damned fool Nature to handicap us accordin' to the code at the beginnin'. Weight for age and a five-pound penalty. But no, she must try something fancy, and as a consequence there is no race. She ought to know better with all her experience. There are poor old knackers that can't push one leg before the other and have never won a plate, that have got their ten pounds extry; and there are smart young five-year-olds that haven't got an ounce. I never saw such handicapping in my life. Why can't she be simple and straightforward and cut her clothes accordin' to her cloth? As for makin' a thing perfect, she can't. She hasn't got sense enough. She can't even make a hoss, damn her! It's either all action and no heart; or if it happens to be good at timber it's a thousand to five it's touched in the wind. She's taken too many contracts, has that old fool. Porson—where's Porson? Come, my boy, don't you see the jug's empty?"

This is no extreme specimen of the conversational style of the Right Honourable Charles Chevenix, Thirteenth Baron Bosket of Hipsley in the kingdom of Great Britain. With incorrigible *naïveté* it was his custom to meander amid his

woes, baring his most private thought, withholding nothing from the mass of self-disclosure that enabled him to stand as an eternal prototype: the victim of the amenities of conjugal life, who yet appeared to derive a maudlin pleasure from his lot. Never was a creature ground so small in the mills of domesticity; yet so graceful were his protests against his sad condition that a bloom of martyrdom might be discerned to shine about him. A more vivid tint was contributed thereby to the perfect flower of pathos. In all his complaints he never achieved the note of acrimony. He pitied himself profoundly, but the sentiment of pity was a chief foible of his nature. The moment he discovered a case as grievous as his own, and let it be laid to his door that he often did, he was quite as ready to decorate it with a chastened tear.

Wherever sportsmen congregated his name was a household word. On the racecourse and at the covert-side in personal popularity he stood next to the Heir Apparent. Of every form of manly exercise he was the patron and arch-priest. No stony "ped" or drunken "pug" ever sought his aid in vain. He met the acute pecuniary need of many a fallen angel and light of other days. Himself no anchorite, he dispensed largesse among all sorts and conditions of men. He never asked who they were, or why they were what they were, but accepted them exactly as they were represented to him. The mere existence of such a one was an evil in a decently conducted state. He was an offence to morals and political economy; a fosterer of the idle, the worthless and the corrupt; a patron of all forms of vagabondage on which the sun had ever seen fit to shine. His generosity was as bountiful as that of Nature herself. It had been said of him that he would give the last half-crown he had in the world to a blind beggar in the Strand, casting at the same time his last crust to the blind man's dog; and would then proceed humbly to borrow one and sixpence of the mendicant, that he might take a cab to his "doss" on the Thames Embankment, the odd sixpence for the cabman, for it was argued that even in his last extremity he would have chosen to walk rather than so far forget himself as to discharge a son of Nimshi with no more than a legal fare.

Having now delivered his customary short excursus on his own hard case, a permanent injustice that required to be ventilated every day, he returned with new valour to that special tyranny under which he had discovered his nieces suffered. By hook or by crook it had to be redressed. When he took a charitable idea into his head he could be very tenacious; and again, such olive branches being denied to his own domestic hearth, Broke himself hardly cherished the "little chestnut fillies" more tenderly than he.

"Jane," he said with a sudden inspiration, and smiled a little roguishly to find himself so cunning, "I suppose you know it's likely that Wimbledon's home, and he may be comin' over to-day from Hazelby?"

"Ah, our poor Harry," said Mrs. Broke in her most motherly voice. "Charles, you surprise me. He is so seldom anywhere since he lost poor dear Mary. Besides, I thought he was at Davos."

Lord Bosket thought so too, but, like Brer Rabbit "he lay low and said nuffin'." For it was easy to deduce by a new animation in the manner of his sister that the case had acquired a fresh aspect. The Duke of Wimbledon's appearances in public had of late been so rare that when one was in the unhappy predicament of having six penniless girls to settle in life it was almost an affront to Providence to ignore them. Therefore in something under three minutes the inexorable lady had made a concession—a particularly graceful one to be sure. Her breeding was much too perfect to allow cause and effect to obtrude themselves in her tactics; but it was a concession nevertheless. After all, it *was* a fine morning for hunting; the girls *must* be encouraged to preserve their sovereign health; Hegel's *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* could wait until they returned. But they must promise to be home early.

"Yes, mother," said Joan demurely.

Still there was a fine spirit in her eager face as she rose from the table.

"Come," she said. "Delia, please go and tell Simkin to have Popsie, the Colonel and Pat ready as soon as he can."

"Come here, little gell," said Lord Bosket, grabbing Delia as she was hastening to obey orders. "Give your Uncle Charles a kiss. Nice, shy little filly, is it? I told

'em to put a saddle on your new quad Twopence out o' Threepence. Pretty bit o' stuff. Have a look at him when you go down and see if he comes up to your big ideas. You people are so almighty particular, you know, that you can hardly humble yourselves to sit anything under a National winner."

"Dear Uncle Charles!" cried the other five, circling about him on their way to the door. Next to their father and their brother he ranked as their boon companion. It delighted them to pay the toll he exacted of one and all.

By what mysterious agent their mother's iron resolve had been softened so suddenly they did not know; nor did they try to learn. It was enough that they were going out hunting after all; and that their Uncle Charles, notwithstanding that he swore so, and was always calling to Porson to replenish the whisky jar, and that he had the funniest way of talking that ever was heard, was just about the dearest and kindest man and uncle in all the world. Of course their father was excluded from this generalization. The deities are very properly barred in a comparison of mortals. Whatever were the shining attributes of their Uncle Charles, his flesh being subject to decay he could wear no nimbus; his place was a little this side the mythological. Their father was one apart, a fabled character, a myth, a hero, a figure of romance, a god on a pedestal.

"Those are what I call gells," said their uncle as soon as they had gone; "keen as the wind, and fresh as a March mornin'! I like the colour of 'em. They're my sort. I'm not much of a feller, I'm not, but I've got a very high opinion of those little gells. Jane, if you go spoilin' those nice little fillies by makin' 'em clever, you'll be sorry. You've got to marry 'em, remember. And a man if he is worth his salt won't look at women of genius even if they are twice as smart as the deuce, and four times as ugly. Mind you, Jane, I don't think you will. I give you the credit of knowin' what's what. You are fly, my gell, you are. You've got the brains of this family, although it's a back-handed compliment that is. But let's have no more cussedness, *if* you please. Nice little fillies are not to be had for the askin'; and when they are yours you've got to mind your 'p's' and 'q's.' And if you are wise you'll

keep clear of Emma. That missis of mine would give Mr. Plato his gruel in about a quarter of an hour. She is worse than her *Collected Works.*"

A demure smile was his recompense for this sage advice. Presently he changed his manner. Lowering his voice, his confidentialness which was that of wisdom unalloyed, acquired an insinuation that was not unworthy of a lawyer's clerk.

"Talkin' of marriage," he said, "somebody told me the other day that things had been fixed up between our young Billy and that Wayling gell. You had better give me the office, because I've got a pony on it."

"I think Charles at least the announcement is a little premature."

Mrs. Broke's smile was as placid as her eyes, but she had brought to perfection the art of affirming a fact with a denial of it. Her brother at least knew what construction to place upon her demeanour. He laughed.

"I've lost my pony all right. Jane, you *are* fly. So you've hooked the heiress! It's what you've been wanting this many a day. How you've kept body and soul together all these years I'm damned if I know, as I said to Salmon the other night. Hooked the heiress have you? You are just as fly as they make 'em. You've missed your vocation, my gell. If you had taken those brains on the Turf, you would have made a bit. Suppose I had better congratulate you; you too, old son."

Husband and wife laughed without resentment. They were accustomed to a frankness for which their relation was famed from one end of England to the other. Besides they could afford to be good-humoured. A much-coveted prize had recently come within the grasp of a bitterly impoverished family.

Lord Bosket seemed to grow thoughtful.

"I am sorry for Bill," he exclaimed suddenly. "It's no good sayin' I ain't. I can't stand that Wayling gell. She's a righteous one, I'm certain. Belongs to the missis' gang. In fact, if it comes to that, I'm not at all sure that I wouldn't prefer the old dutch. Poor young Billy; you've my sympathy, my lad. Many a time will you wish yourself a counter-jumper at twenty bob a week and your

grub before you are through with *her*. You'll be your Uncle Charles, my boy. I wonder how many times that damned old fool has wished the same. Led me to church in blinkers and a halter, and, my boy, I'll lay a monkey that that's their game with you. Pore feller! Pore feller! What's the good of tryin' to be a cock angel if you can't grow wings!"

The nature of the subject made a further recital of Lord Bosket's sorrows imminent, but it was mercifully arrested by the return of his nieces. They were equipped with habits of a style somewhat antediluvian, and with bowler hats battered into all shapes save that of the original, which no doubt was antediluvian too. Fashion, however, did not count in their case. From head to heel they had the indefinable look of the "workman." It was a saying of their uncle's that must be allowed a certain truth: "Shove any one of 'em into a sack, tie her in with a bit o' string, stick a saucepan over her nose, and set her on a hoss, and for style I shall back that little gell against anything on two legs that ever went on four. Out of the saddle they're not beauties none of 'em, but in it they are as handsome as paint." And allowing for a certain affectionate partiality, they might well appeal to that inveterate sportsman who furnished of them many a lofty description, of which he himself, in the opinion of good judges, was not unworthy. As well as being bred to the saddle they had been bred to the fields. They were as natural and vigorous as any creatures there to be found.

Lord Bosket took them round to the yard to expound the points of Delia's "hoss," "Twopence out of Threepence"; also those of a new "quad" of his own, "Apollinaris out of Biography," which he proceeded to do with a child-like gravity that endeared him more than ever to his audience. Subsequently they bore off their Uncle Charles to see the badger, entertaining him by the way with another elaborate and highly coloured account of its capture. Afterwards were submitted to his inspection a ferret, a stoat, a fox, a weasel, a cheetah, a mongoose and innumerable dogs, doves and horses, not to mention a stable-cat blind of one eye: a formidable family of pets that were called on to receive his sanction about three times a week.

CHAPTER III

Which the Judicious are exhorted to Skip

WHILE our hero and his attendant Dianas are negotiating hedges and ditches in the February thaw, it is our duty to take a shrewder look into his material state. In person fine and lusty, he was in his mind the true embodiment of feudalism, as was to be expected of one whose passion for the land had congealed the temper of his understanding into the clogging thickness of his native loam. Had you dug over his mind with a spade, nothing would have been turned up in it save the immemorial lust of possession, the pride of race, the abasement of spirit before the soil, which even at this day rendered him as foremost an Englishman as any, although, a little paradoxically, considering how our enlightenment has been vaunted before an envious Europe for at least a hundred years, he still remained the essential type and mirror of the Briton of the days before Froissart and Chaucer in the twelfth century after Christ.

To reconcile such a one to the peculiar pinch of his day and generation was impossible. Nothing; not his wife, not his friends, not his circumstances, not experience itself, that over-rated monitor, conspire as they might, could reconcile him to the heresy that at the dawn of the twentieth century of the Christian era, pounds, shillings and pence had superseded more picturesque considerations in point of virtue. He could not bring himself to believe that a martial ancestry, unsullied thews and a strong right arm went for less than the arithmetical rectitude of your greasy dealers in food-stuffs and cotton fabrics. He could not bring himself to believe that pre-eminence before the world was the fruit of a sufficient sum in the three per

cents. wrung out of the sweat of the weak and had no connexion whatever with a two-handed sword and a suit of armour. That money was the end and the beginning, the beginning and the end, was to his mediaeval mind as fantastic as to suppose that a tradesman could be a gentleman. It hurt him to think that among a splendidly practical people the only gauge of your merit was the amount of your income. What was the good of tracing your descent in an unbroken line from a Norman robber or a Saxon one if upon the consideration of a few guineas persons who had no particular insight into the mysteries of the letter aitch, and other arcana devised by Caste for its own protection, could trace theirs from Charlemagne himself, or good King Arthur, or an immortal husbandman and landowner of the name of Adam? Why have a handle to your name if it was open to all the world to buy its nobility like it bought its mutton, and every greengrocer pushed a seat in the House of Lords before him on his barrow? In vain was his voice uplifted with the ducal bard—

> Let wealth and commerce, laws and learning die,
> But leave us still our old nobility.

Alas! that lyrical cry wrought no consolation in his tormented spirit.

On the other hand, to do him no injustice, our hero's conception of his own figure in the world was no unworthy one. His acres, his accidental status, his hereditary merit he found impossible to reverence too much. He safeguarded them as jealously as his foxes, his blood-stock, his turnips and his daughters. Like the ancestral ivy they gave colour to an edifice otherwise substantially plain, yet unlike it they were possessions which his creditors had not the power to touch.

Pride, says the moralist, is a weed that flourishes in a barren soil; therefore the leaner our hero's condition the higher it waxed. A very stalwart of a man, fed upon our honest English beef and ale, he had a curious impregnability to the time of day. His constitutional misfortunes were a little overwhelming. For granting his pride, torpidity, and self-esteem, the first of all was to be found

in the hour the gods had chosen to impose his personality upon a slightly amused and slightly irreverent world. As a feudal baron he would have been a complete success, but in his capacity of plain country squire in the late days of Victoria, with the habits of his forefathers at the mercy of a pecuniary need they had never been schooled to suffer, the figure that he cut was hardly so heroic as his bearing. A king does not appear at his best with holes in his coat. Poor Broke with his timber down and a mortgage on his manor house was so thinly clad that he could be seen to shiver every time the wind blew. Those of his neighbours who challenged his pretensions with a few of their own, acquired in several instances with the painful and recent suddenness of their millions, were already looking forward to his extinction. The nearest of these, the wealthiest, and incomparably the most audacious, was one Lord Salmon, the latest thing in peers, whose views were couched in terms of a licentious nature. "We never cease to cherish the name of Edmund Broke, the last of the elect—perfect father and husband, domestic laurel crowns his visionary brow, and all that sort of thing. But there are no joints in his backbone. He can't bend. He'll be worth looking at when the crash comes."

Broke's judgment on the adventurous Salmon contained more clinching expressions. A man who in his own words "began life with a barrel-organ and three white mice," who dared to put a price on Covenden, the sacred earth of the family of Broke, who dared to put a price on it ten per cent. above its market value, "because when a place fits my fancy, money's no obstacle," was a person too irresponsible to incur the censure of the self-respecting. Rather he should be laughed at temperately. But Salmon was too successful to be laughed at. Broke, therefore, had recourse to the weapons of the weaker party. He damned his eyes.

Salmon replied by an affront to civilization. He built a mansion in the Victorian style. The lord of the manor could no longer pace his bare demesne oblivious to the House of Salmon. For the seat of that noble family had been raised upon an adjacent hill, part of which was appropriated turbary. The place was a paradise of sanitation.

It was equipped with every modern inconvenience, at once amazing and American, lighted with electricity and heated by steam, a really high achievement in discomfort, blushing in red brick. Lord Salmon, however, retained his self-possession through all this relentless grandeur. It hardly excited him at all. His candour still remained as great as his *insouciance*. He still remained the unassuming humourist he had always been. He acknowledged as freely that Toplands owed its being to the Semitic origin of Saul first Baron Salmon as that the patent of nobility of Saul first Baron Salmon aforesaid was the interest on fifty thousand pounds invested discreetly in the funds of the Party that most required it. In apologising for the unavoidable absence of his ancestors he took a simple-minded pleasure. "One can't have everything, you know," he was wont to say with quiet resignation. "Life has not been ungenerous on the whole. We keep a few horses in training and a yacht at Cowes. We dine at the Carlton and hunt with the Quorn. We have a moor in Scotland and a river in Norway. We don't lack for friends; and Lady Salmon says she has quite a horror of paste. As for my ancestors, I am a man with a Tribe."

Lord Salmon was the antithesis of his neighbour. He was beginning; Broke was ceasing to be. He had intelligence, ideas, boundless energy; Broke was mercifully delivered from inconveniences of this nature. Broke's was the sturdy limitation of mind, the admirable bovine absence of temperament of your true John Bull. The one embittered the life of his head-keeper; the other was a country gentleman. The one endowed hospitals and homes for working men; the other contracted debts he knew not how to pay. Lord Salmon was a promoter of public companies, a radiant person, bland, and splendid in *insouciance*, peerless in audacity; whilst Broke was inveterate in pedigree, uncompromising in his gait, unmatched in dignity, azure of blood and very thick, consequently sluggish; a caricature of a type, but not without some of the saving graces of his order.

It was an open secret in the county that Broke was on his last legs. You had only to put two and two together. The depreciation of land-values was a heavy factor; and

again, the aristocratic instinct is not to be gratified throughout a term of expensive centuries without sooner or later Threadneedle Street asking for better security. If only we live long enough, the most austere of us have to submit to the discovery of coal under the virgin soil. The Brokes, a good freebooting family, had contrived in feudal days to live in purple and fine linen. They took what they wanted. But other times, other manners. Under Victorian statutes the strong hand was liable to be interpreted as a felony. The strong brain had superseded it. Persons of an ingenious turn, the Salmons for example, arranged their "booms" and their "slumps," "rigged" their "markets," "floated" their "companies," knew how to be a "bear" and when to be a "bull," rented Park Lane, had their little places in the country, a convenient distance from town: and were able with their indomitable wealth to menace and to oust the county families or, what they liked better, to force them to compromise.

The fusion of blood and brains was the first condition. The Brokes lifted up their voices without avail. The Salmons held the power and did not hesitate to wield it. The Brokes must perish or submit. The philosophers among the *ancien régime* clenched their teeth and intermarried with the bloated plutocrat; the astute among them made a Gilbertian attempt to beg the question of their dignity by taking in matrimony the daughters of the pork-packers of Chicago on the plea that every American woman is a queen in her own right—a doubtful compliment to a democratic country which yet seemed to please it very well. The Brokes of Covenden, those stubborn Die-Hards, endeavoured in the meantime to pursue the even tenour of their way, entering into alliances only with those whom they were pleased to call "the right sort," a term of an admirable vagueness suited to the character of their ideals.

Poor Mrs. Broke, with her penniless and uninteresting girls in the market, was at the end of her wits. She was too keenly alive to the exigencies of the age to have scruples as to what direction they married in, provided that money had been found there. But our hero, whose exclusiveness grew more inordinate as the occasion for it grew less apparent to the world, had set down his foot.

They should marry "the right sort" or remain in single blessedness. In the matter of her son, however, the dauntless lady had already achieved a success, notwithstanding the restrictions under which she laboured. The beautiful, accomplished and absurdly rich Miss Wayling of Calow, the last of a line celebrated in song and story, mistress of Calow Court and Crag's Foot Priory, Long Shafton Hall, and still better, one-fifth of a northern coal county, was a young woman whose eligibility was fabulous. She was indeed a match; and if report was faithful, her heart was thrown in with her shekels as a sort of make-weight. A young woman of character, report said also. Was ever such luck as this young man's?

When her family had at last gone to hunt the fox, Mrs. Broke was able to devote her attention to the remainder of the morning's post. Of three letters that addressed themselves particularly to her notice one was in the handwriting of her son, whilst the two others, directed to Edmund Broke, Esq., were of a commercial nature and came therefore within the cognizance of his wife, who conducted all the business of his household by virtue of her gift for affairs.

Her son's letter, thrown off in the casual style so characteristic of its writer, was to let his mother know that a brother officer, one Dicky Sykes, having had the misfortune "to take a tremendous toss and smash his *showlder* to blazes," was compelled to give up polo for a time. He was selling his ponies in consequence, and in a disinterested and courteous manner was prepared, purely as an act of friendship, to offer a pair, "the pick of the basket" for "a *monkey*," *anglicé* five hundred pounds, "on the nail." He, the writer, was almost ashamed to accept them; it was almost like getting them for nothing; but notwithstanding the modesty of this sum his "screw," as he had pointed out so often to "his dear old mummy," could only cope with difficulty with the bare necessities of life, and as a pair of polo ponies, however necessary to his well-being, hardly came within this category, he hoped "his good old mummy" would let him have a cheque by return. In a postscript not very legible occurred these phrases: "I don't want you to get fussing about me and

Maud Wayling. I'm not her sort. I'm a *plane* sort of chap, and don't want anything so *clarsy* as Maud."

Mrs. Broke read and re-read this letter. She laughed a little and she sighed a little. There was a softness in her eyes that might have surprised her daughters very much had they been able to see it.

She found the other letters of a more prosaic kind. The first was in these terms:—

"Edmund Broke, Esq.—Dear Sir, I beg again to call your attention to the fact that your account is overdrawn considerably in excess of the securities we hold. I am instructed by my Directors to inform you that it is impossible to permit this deficit to be augmented. I am further instructed by my Directors respectfully to urge you to reduce it without delay. The undersigned would be glad to arrange a personal interview at your early convenience. I am, dear Sir, yours very faithfully, *per pro* Marr's Banking Co., Ltd., JAS. B. CHAYNEY."

The second was a little more to the point:—

"Edmund Broke, Esq.—Sir, We were much surprised to have this morning the enclosed cheque on Marr's Banking Company, Ltd., returned to us endorsed R.D. Unless we receive a remittance for the full amount (£103 16*s*. 5*d*.) per return of post we shall be compelled to take steps for its immediate recovery. We are, Sir, your obedient servants, DENISE ET CIE."

Mrs. Broke was neither surprised nor embarrassed by such manifestations of the difficulties that threatened from hour to hour to destroy them. She knew they were on the verge; a mortgage on every stick that was not entailed; and creditors knocking at the gate. For many a weary year this indomitable woman had been economizing to the last desperate farthing, and here at the end of that long period ruin still grinned at them through the holes in his mask. He had ear-marked this family as his own. Sooner or later he meant to have it.

When Broke returned late in the afternoon with his tired and muddy charges, she engaged his attention in the library, even before he had time to take a bath and change his clothes. She sought his opinion of the letters, and the steps he proposed to take.

The dispirited man sank into a chair.

"I don't know," he said feebly. "I am always trying for better mortgages, but land goes for nothing now. Denise et Cie? Who are they?"

"Court dresses for Joan and Philippa. It ought to have been paid long ago. Harriet, Jane and Margaret have worn them too."

"Yes, yes, I suppose it ought. How *do* people live on nothing?"

"We have been doing it, Edmund, for nearly thirty years. We shall be obliged to let No. 3 this season, or, if we can find somebody to take it, I think it would be better to do things thoroughly and sell the lease."

"I was fearing that."

"I am sure not more than I. It is so necessary for the girls."

"Poor beggars!" said their father with a peculiar tenderness. "Not much of a show for them. They have a poor time as it is. And now they will not be able to have their bit of a season."

"I think I may be able to induce Emma to have Delia with her at Grosvenor Street for May. They will all be out then. She may have one of the others also: Emma has a very good heart."

"Poor beggars!" he repeated, with emphasis. "But even if we give up No. 3, I am afraid it will not help very much. However, I will see Breffit to-morrow. And, by the bye, the sooner Billy is married the better."

"I quite agree with you."

"He is not like the girls. I have not too much confidence in that fellow somehow. It would not surprise me to find him with his heels over the traces some fine morning. He is careless and extravagant."

Mrs. Broke demurred with a little smile. Maternal tenderness had not the heart to subscribe to such a strong opinion.

"Obstinate, headstrong; you have to watch that sort. It would be nice for us if he came the same sort of cropper that Charles did. I think you remember Charles?"

"Well, yes," said the sister of Charles with a slightly forced laugh.

The allusion was to the Right Honourable Charles Chevenix, thirteenth Baron Bosket, who at the present tender age of his nephew William had regaled his private friends and shocked the democracy of his protesting country by pledging his name with that of Miss Maisie Malone, a star of the Light Comedy Theatre. How Mr. Charles—it was in the time of his father, the late peer—started on a tour of the globe on the very morning that the twelfth baron arrived at the lady's villa residence in St. John's Wood attended by his lawyer and a blank chèque, a tendency to apoplexy, and a perfectly natural flow of English unrestrained, and how the sum of ten thousand pounds became the amount of the indemnity, was a page of the family history to which Mrs. Broke was still unable to turn without a shudder, although it had been written years and years ago.

"I would lose no time in getting him fixed up," said Broke. "We shall not be safe with that fellow until there is a halter on him."

Mrs. Broke here drew his attention to the young man's letter.

"I fancy he won't get his ponies," he said, and upon reaching the postscript added, "Why, the fellow's a fool. He doesn't know what's good for him. I can't understand a man in his senses shying at a girl like Maud. Her mother was a Fitzurse; the Waylings were on the Roll of the Visiting Justices; she's an heiress to boot and a catch for anybody. The fellow's a fool."

"Yes, but a nice fool."

"A reckless fool. A fool who doesn't care. Had you knocked the nonsense out of him regularly as you have done with the girls, we should not have him parading his tastes like this."

His son's letter had touched our autocrat smartly.

"I think, my dear, you overstate the case. I am sure neither Billy nor the girls would think of acting contrary to their own interests. But Billy, manlike, insists upon his grumble."

"If you take my advice, you will waste no time. In some things I don't trust that fellow."

With this final expression of his wisdom our hero rose to remove his muddy presence from the library.

"If the girls have come down, will you please send them here. And please tell them to bring their German dictionaries."

"Poor beggars!" said their father yet again as he went out.

He had a deep-seated pity for his girls. He could never divest himself of the idea that they were particularly in need of it. He felt the sharpest pinch of his circumstances when he reflected that they had to suffer a poverty to which, could his own feelings have been consulted, he would have been the last man in the world to condemn them. Then their mother ruled them with a rod of iron. It was doubtless for their good, since every act of hers was so just and wise; but all the same he did think she was a bit hard on them sometimes.

They filed into the library with deep apprehension. In the field fear had hardly a meaning; but this room flanked with shelf upon shelf of old grim tomes in which the stern spirit of their mother seemed to be invested, was the abode of terror. However, this afternoon there was a respite to their real sufferings, a somewhat painful encounter with the German language, while their mother read aloud that portion of their brother's letter that she felt concerned them.

"Your father tells me that he cannot find him a penny more than he receives at present. Have you a suggestion?"

Had Billy desired the moon, the female members of his house would have endeavoured humbly to procure it for him with their pocket-money. Even his mother could relent where he was concerned. As for his sisters, no sacrifice was too severe could it gratify his lightest whim. In their adoring eyes he was the lineal descendant of their father. The shining qualities of that god and hero among mankind had been transmitted to his son, the heir of his name and fortune, and also of his immortality. Their loyalty was of the unflinching quality that generations of their race had rendered to the king. Billy could do no wrong; and if a thought strayed into his mind, or a deed was recorded of him, it was enough. The ungenerous might have suggested that this was a delicate acknowledgment on the part of his sisters of the infrequency with which the

young man was moved to surrender himself to the inconveniences of thought or action. But they would have been refuted fiercely. Billy was perfect: the kindest, bravest, cleverest, best-looking brother in the world. Than to merge their own desires in his they asked no more.

"We could sell some of the hunters," said Joan. "Two or three of the thoroughbreds, Pat, Whitenose and The Doctor might be worth five hundred pounds."

She spoke without hesitation. Her sisters regarded her with a wistful admiration. She was of the uncompromising type of which history is pregnant with examples. She would have struck off her right hand with her left had it ever chanced to occur to her that such a course was essential. Her sisters admired hugely this fibre in her, and would have followed her lead anywhere, since they had all been cast in the same heroic mould.

If to prove the rule you insist on an exception, it must be the youngest, Delia. To be sure she was but a child. But again and again the other five, whose mature years ranged from eighteen to one and twenty, had been forced to confess, tacitly, in their inmost hearts, that they had no confidence in Delia. They were afraid she was not quite one of them. They had to be very strict with her. There was something delicate, impressionable, something that you might even call poetic and uncanny about her. She had longer eyelashes than any of them, and they curled up at the ends in the oddest manner. Her eyes too were bluer than anybody's, bluer even than Joan's, with a queer filmy sort of thing hovering above them, that made them very strange and unfathomable. When a thing like that hovers about your eyes it is hard to tell what you will be at next. She had been convicted of several misdemeanours already, although she was such a baby in point of years. You will remember how that morning she had contrived to disgrace herself on her birthday. Nor could you ascribe such an incident wholly to her age. At no time of life could Joan, Philippa, Harriet, Jane and Margaret have been capable of misconducting themselves in that way.

Once they had found her in tears over a fairy tale; and several times she had shown a tendency to read books of her own accord. Once she had missed her tea because she

was reading in the library. What sort of book it was that she read they did not know, but that it exercised a pernicious influence upon her tender mind there could be no doubt. Solecisms she had committed already; but she would have committed others and worse perhaps had they not sat on her constantly and snubbed her dutifully from her earliest youth. For seek as she might to conceal her guilt there was no glossing over the fact that she kept opinions of her own. White mice and black rabbits and the thousand and one delectable things the law allowed them to keep did not suffice for her. She must hanker after the illicit and differ from other people. Indeed the severest thing that lenient man their father had said of any one of them had been said of Delia. He said that had she been a boy she might have grown up to be a Radical.

CHAPTER IV

Lord Chesterfield to his Son

THE next morning Broke rode to Cuttisham to see his agent. He was in a despondent mood. As he drove through the February mists, and the rain trickled into his skin, and his horse ploughed through mire that had borne his name for a longer period than history had kept a record, his thoughts were bitter. Look which way he might, there was no light to shine upon the gloom of his affairs. Like the sombre weepings of heaven, it was all-pervading. His lands were rotting under his feet; his house was tumbling about his ears. Gates were unhinged, hedges broken, farms tenantless, fields lying sterile for lack of the manure he could not afford to buy. All things were symbolical of the decay of him and his.

Never did a man feel so powerless before the cruel might of circumstance. He was not cast in the mould that can grapple with two strong hands at the throat of destiny. He had been born with a silver spoon in his mouth. If he were hungry, he opened his lips, and lo! he was fed. He was accustomed to discharge all his obligations to the outside world by the simple and excellent expedient of a cheque on his bankers. His people had been accustomed to doing it before him, ever since banks came into use. It was their way, therefore it was his. It was unreasonable to ask him to devise another when theirs was altogether to be commended. Look at the matter in what aspect he might, he did not see what he could do to retrieve his position. If he farmed his own land, he lost his money; and to induce others to farm it for him was not easy in the present state of agriculture. But a man must live, and a Broke must live

like a gentleman. In this age of the plutocrat and the parvenu it behoved one of his lineage to keep a light burning.

His mood was no lighter when at last he came into Cuttisham, the county town of the shire. Two out of three of the passers-by touched their hats to him, and tradesmen kow-towed from their doors, but this deference brought no balm to his spirit. If anything, it made his depression the more severe. He cantered solemnly along the cobbles of the narrow streets, until having turned two corners, and having passed a Baptist Chapel, a Wesleyan Chapel, a Methodist New Connexion, a Bethel, and a Congregational Church, he found himself in a thoroughfare a little narrower, a little cleaner, and a little faster asleep than those he had traversed already. It bore the name of High Street. It was encumbered with that air of last-century respectability which Mr. Addison would have called "vastly genteel." It was the locale of the post office and the bank; of the lawyer and the doctor; of the Society for the Resuscitation of Decayed Gentlewomen, and the Home for Indigent Peers; and, above all, it contained the office and abode of Mr. Joseph Breffit.

As the sun is to our solar system, in that relation did Mr. Breffit stand to the social and economic life of his native place. He was the luminary around which all things revolved. He was the fixed star in the local firmament, without whose sanction it was supposed the world could not be carried on. There was nothing too great or too trivial to be outside the sphere of Mr. Breffit's interest. If a subscription was opened for a charitable object, his was the first name upon the list. If the Lord Lieutenant of the county gave five pounds, Mr. Breffit gave ten; if the Lord Lieutenant gave fifty pounds, Mr. Breffit gave a hundred. If a drunkard was sent to prison for a week, Mr. Breffit was on the bench to send him there. Afterwards if he expressed a wish to reform, Mr. Breffit got him admitted into a Retreat for Inebriates; if subsequently he grew more licentious in his habits, Mr. Breffit distrained upon his goods for rent; if less licentious, Mr. Breffit took him into his employ. If he

died, Mr. Breffit furnished the money for his burial out of the Insurance Policy he had taken out in the company Mr. Breffit represented. If he absconded, Mr. Breffit signed the order for the committal of his wife and family to the workhouse.

When a distinguished person came to Cuttisham it was as the guest of Mr. Breffit. A lecture could not be given in the Town Hall unless Mr. Breffit occupied the chair. If the Rev. Mr. Rubbidge, the popular author of *Round the Ruddy Rhododendron Roots*, that beautiful and tear-compelling book, discoursed on "Vulgarity Considered as a Paying Concern," Mr. Breffit introduced him to his audience in a few homely but well-chosen words. During those seasons when the local members were constrained to loose the arrows of their oratory, Mr. Breffit sat at their right hand on the platform, taking precedence even of the Mayor and the county magnates. It was his inalienable privilege to say "Hear, hear" in the forensic pauses of these masters of political ineptitude three times as often and twice as loudly as anybody else.

Cuttisham was proud of Mr. Breffit, and Mr. Breffit was proud of Cuttisham. He knew everybody, and he knew everything; pre-eminently he knew how many beans made five. He was a land agent primarily; he was also a lawyer, an insurance agent, a stockbroker, a dabbler in public companies, a breeder of cattle and horses, a banker, a brewer, a landed proprietor, a buyer of anything, a seller of anybody. He was a philanthropist and a publicist, a justice of the peace, a guardian of the poor, a churchwarden, a county councillor, a colonel in the volunteers. In all weathers, in all seasons, a tall silk hat, a white waistcoat, and a pair of highly polished brown boots, were three articles indispensable to his attire.

Not only did Mr. Breffit know the business of everybody in Cuttisham almost as well as his own, but he knew that of the favoured persons who dwelt in the county. Further, he conducted it. Nor was it their business alone with which he was acquainted. He knew their estate, their revenue, the *personnel* and Christian names of their respective families, their balance at the bank,

their armorial bearings, and when the first cuttings were planted of their genealogical trees. It was his boast that he was brought into perpetual contact with the nobility and gentry. And as even the most hard-headed and successful men are prone to undervalue the things they enjoy and unduly to enhance the things they do not, so Mr. Breffit, who had wealth and a keen intelligence, set these as nought in comparison with what it rejoiced him to speak of as blue blood and aristocratic lineage.

Now the one among his clients to whom the past had been most liberal in this matter, without a doubt, was Mr. Broke. Persons there were better endowed with mere things of the world; persons of a more generous culture; persons of title; persons more distinguished in the public service; persons of a wider intellectual range; persons whom pecuniarily it was a greater privilege to know; but there was not one among them all whose acquaintance Mr. Breffit valued so highly as that of Mr. Broke of Covenden. He felt that in according to Mr. Broke, a plain country squire, the first place in his esteem, he did honour to himself. It would have been so easy to reserve this particular niche for the master of Hazelby, or the Earl of Croxton, or one among the crop of baronets that flourished in the shire. Mr. Breffit flattered himself that where a man of less perception, a man of a coarser fibre, would have been captivated by mere vulgar gawds, he could remain unbiassed and impervious. Compared with the Brokes, their friends and neighbours were only people of yesterday. That dotard on their mystic excellence did himself the greatest credit who enshrined these symbols of the best and highest as the gods of his idolatry.

When our hero arrived at the plain brass plate that kept the entrance to Mr. Breffit's office, that astute gentleman was seated in his private room in the company of his son. The father, small, grey, wiry, without a superfluous ounce of flesh upon his bones, had an almost juvenile eagerness of demeanour, which sprang from a mercurial temperament. It was to the peculiar quality of this temperament that he owed his success in life. A many-sided man of affairs, a man of numberless interests,

it was the feverish energy with which he threw himself into them that enabled him to push them to a successful issue. He pursued the art of turning an honest penny with the ardour that belongs to the baser sort of genius. His was the invaluable secret of producing blood from a stone.

The son did not present the pregnant points of the father. Doubtless they were not there to start with; but granting that they were, they had been slurred over and defaced to the verge of the invisible by the media of the university and the public school. A clean-limbed, broad-shouldered, well-set-up, clear-eyed young man, he looked the embodiment of good humour and perfect health. His countenance was hardly so significant as that of a well-groomed horse, but emphatically it belonged to his nation, his age, his class, and his education. Slightly self-conscious in his simplest pose and the smallest action that he undertook, extraordinarily "afraid of giving himself away"—the phrase is his own—his perpetual and visible ambition seemed to be to attain an austere vacancy of feature, and a demeanour the perfect affectation of phlegm.

He was an average specimen of a vast but not exhilarating type. One might spend a year in his company, and bear away no more significant impression of him than that his hair was parted in the middle with tremendous precision, that his tie was of many colours, that his waistcoat was embellished with gilt buttons and braid, that the last button was left undone, that his collar was inordinately tall, that he carried his handkerchief up his sleeve, and that he turned up the ends of his trousers.

Father and son were engaged in an important conversation. The son was at the threshold of a career. Since completing his third year at Cambridge in the previous June the young man had spent a month in the cricket field, a fortnight with the grouse, a fortnight with the partridge, a fortnight with the pheasant, and several fortnights in town doing the music halls and the theatres, in visiting his friends and the friends of his friends. He was now about to settle down under his father's eye. In

his immaculate person and the exalted sphere into which his attainments were to lead him, the father hoped confidently that much honour would accrue to them both.

"I've money, my boy, and I've money to spare," Mr. Breffit the elder was saying. "You'll never want for that, my boy; you'll never need to make a farthing for yourself. So I don't see, my boy, really, why you should go into business at all. Speaking frankly, I am about to speak to you, my boy, very frankly, I think it better that you should not. Not that there is any disgrace attaching to it nowadays, of course. The old-fashioned prejudice against 'being in trade' and that sort of nonsense is dead. To-day really high-class people are bringing their sons up to it, aye, and are going into it themselves, where a generation ago they would have scorned the idea. But I don't intend that you shall touch it, my boy. Safer not to, depend upon it, safer not to. You see, at present you are just the son of old Joe Breffit; until you have made your way, and are launched as a country gentleman, it will be better to run no risks."

Breffit *fils* nodded his head complacently. The suggestion would "suit him down to the ground." His talents qualified him eminently to do justice to the scheme. Breffit *père* drew closer, lowered his voice, and imparted his next phrase in a whisper of unction and mystery.

"You see, I want you to be just the gentleman, my boy. That's the trade for you. Just the gentleman. You ought to be able to be that to a nicety, considering that I've done all I can to make you one. You will not lack for money, as I've said; and you've had the education of a lord. You've got some friends of the right sort already, and you'll have more, my boy, and better, if you will only learn to play your cards. Always remember the golden rule that success is the art of selection. There are the people you must cultivate, and the people you must cut. But, after all, tact, my boy—tact is the secret, tact and a little money. Take a piece of string, my boy, and tie a purse to the end of it to keep it taut, and you have only to know how and when to jerk it for all the world to be dancing on it like the marionettes you see in the puppet show. Stand over there by the window,

my boy, where the light's a bit clearer, so that your old father can have a look at you."

A little sheepishly Mr. Breffit the younger yielded to his sire's enthusiasm. No artist in his studio held his glasses to his nose with a tenderer discretion, nor cocked his head more lovingly to one side, nor manœuvred his distance with a cunninger skill to survey a *chef d'œuvre* to advantage than did Mr. Breffit the elder before this masterpiece he had himself created. The old man rubbed his hands.

"Capital," he said, "capital!"

"Dash it all!" said the young man, reddening awkwardly.

"You look real A 1, my boy, you do indeed. If I didn't know better, I should take you to be the son of a gentleman."

The son looked at the father, and laughed with a slight air of constraint. What a funny old father it was, to be sure! There seemed something strange, almost uncanny, about a father like that.

"I mean what I say, my boy. If I met you walking in Piccadilly, and I didn't know who you were, I should take you to be the real right thing, I should indeed. I suppose you get that trick of holding your head from your mother. She had a drop of good blood in her, only a drop, poor soul! but blood will out, won't it?"

Mr. Breffit the younger grew a little redder than he was before.

"I only hope, my boy, that you will not neglect your opportunities. Nature has been good to you, things in general have been good to you, and I've been good to you, as I think you will admit. I've spent a lot of money on your upbringing; a man cannot send his son to Harrow and Cambridge without having to part. And I've paid for you to get into the best sets; not that I grudge a penny. It has been my aim, as I hope it will be yours, that you should make the right sort of friends—the sort of friends that will get you on in the world. Now all I ask, my boy, is that you make the most of your opportunities. Do that, and I am prepared to pay a lot more. I have got my eye on a place in the county that is just

coming into the market, a regular fine place. Tufton Hall. Poor Lord Algernon Raynes, brother to the Duke of Wimbledon, you know, is having to sell it lock, stock, and barrel People say it's speculation on the Stock Exchange, but I know better, and so does Mrs. Dingley. Now, my boy, I am thinking of taking that place, or buying it possibly, with the cellar, the pictures, the furniture, the stud, the shooting, and all the bag o' tricks. You see, I want you not only to be the gentleman, but I want you to live according to the part. It will be useful for you to have a place where you can entertain your friends. Besides, it will give you a sort of territorial title: young Mr. Breffit of Tufton Hall, eh, what? Now, what do you say to it, my boy? Sound idea, don't you think?"

Mr. Breffit paused with his hands on his knees, a volume of eager interrogation in his face. The son smiled with a serenity that had a touch of indulgence in it. He seemed to think it was a sound idea.

"You see, my boy, I want to keep you clear of Cuttisham. It is well enough for old Joe Breffit, but it will hardly do for young Mr. Breffit of Tufton Hall. I want you to avoid the townspeople as much as you can. You will find that the people among whom you are going to live will ignore them. You must ignore them too. When in Rome you must do as the Romans do. For you will be on sufferance among them until you have married one of them and lived down the prejudice against you. There will be a great deal of prejudice, my boy, at first; you will find it uphill work, with all your fine college friends, to make good your footing, and be received among them as their equal. For uppishness, for stiff-necked arrogance, there is nothing in the world to beat your old county family, my boy, especially when it is encumbered with a short purse and a long pedigree. 'The poorer the prouder' is its motto.

"There are the Brokes of Covenden. Of course they were a great family once: important people at the time of the Conquest, friends of William the Conqueror, and that sort of thing. But they are no more than a name now. They don't count a snap of the fingers as things go nowadays, and they are as poor as the mice under the

wainscot of a Methodist chapel? But for pride, my boy, for cold-drawn, cobwebbed, crystallized pride, I should say Lucifer's as humble as Uriah Heep in comparison with Mr. Broke. I know him, and he knows me, but only in the way of business. He looks on me as being no better than a tradesman; and although I have been the best friend he and his have had for thirty years, he would as soon think of asking me to dine with him as he would his butler. Mind, my boy, I am not saying a word against him. I admire him for it. But that is the sort of thing you will have to contend against, my boy. It is no use people making money in Cuttisham, and then setting up to be gentlefolk in his neighbourhood. Firkin the brewer did that, and Lohmann the pork butcher, and Yardley the linen-draper; but the Brokes take no more notice of them than if they were not there at all. Mind you, my boy, I don't blame them a bit. If I was a Broke, and had been in the landed gentry for a little matter of a thousand years, I would not either. I could afford to keep my pride then, even if I could not afford to keep my timber. Therefore, my boy, you will understand why I want you to dissociate yourself from Cuttisham as much as you can. Your old father will be the greatest enemy you will have to face."

"Not at all," said Mr. Breffit the younger with a well-bred politeness.

"It is very good of you, my boy, to say he will not, but we must agree to differ. Your neighbours will find it harder to forgive you for being the son of old Joe Breffit than if you had crucified your mother. I cannot caution you too sharply to keep clear of the townspeople. Only this morning I saw you talking with young Porter, the son of Porter the bookseller."

"Oh, him," said Mr. Breffit the younger, with an in-inflection in his voice that delighted the parent. "A bounder."

"How can he be anything else? His father is a book-seller."

"Well, you see, I happened to run across him at Cam bridge. He had the infernal cheek to claim my acquaint ance on the strength of our both coming from the same place."

Breffit *père* stood aghast.

"You don't mean to say that that fellow, the son of Porter the bookseller, was at Cambridge too."

"He was," said Breffit *fils* mournfully. "Went up to Trinity on a scholarship, or whatever they call it."

Breffit *père* rubbed his face earnestly as if to wipe away the traces of his incredulity.

"I never heard such a thing in my life. It is monstrous. What can the fellow's father be thinking of? You can depend upon it, my boy, that trouble will come of it. I never yet saw people set up above their station in life but what they learnt to repent it. I cannot tell you how often I have watched it come to pass. The next time I am in Porter's shop I shall tell Porter what I think of him. But really, my boy, I should not have thought that a place with the standing of Cambridge would have admitted that sort of fellow."

"Oh, there's all sorts, you know," said Breffit *fils*, trying to be stoical. "Some extraordinary people you find up at Cambridge I can tell you. Why, lots of them haven't been to a public school."

"Ha!" said Breffit *père*, breathing heavily. "What a pity! I should have thought an ancient seat of learning of that kind, with its traditions and its history, would have been as exclusive as possible. It is sad to think that it throws its doors open to Tom, Dick, and Harry. It is no wonder that mere learning is not thought so much of as it was. Why, had I known as much as that, my boy, I would have sent you to Oxford."

"It is just as bad there," said Breffit *fils*.

"You astonish me. I was always led to understand that our universities were solely for the education of the sons of gentlemen."

There was a considerable pathos in the voice of Breffit *père*, as became one overwhelmed by disillusion. And in his face there was astonishment; but in the very flood-tide of his distress there came a knock on the door of his room. A junior clerk entered.

"A gentleman to see you, sir."

"Name?"

"Mr. Books, sir."

"Mr. Who?"

"Mr. Books, sir."

"Never heard of the man: Tell him I can't see him now. He has not an appointment. Tell him I am engaged, but if he cares to wait I will see him presently."

As the boy closed the door, and retired to convey the information to our hero, Mr. Breffit muttered, "One of those pestilential touts for dictionaries and encyclopaedias I daresay. Not safe from anybody nowadays."

CHAPTER V

A Private View of the Feudal Spirit

WHILE our modern Lord Chesterfield continued to indicate those elements of behaviour which are the seat of success in life, the grand exemplar of his teaching, flower of the English squirearchy, *sans peur et sans reproche*, the mirror and the consummation of what he wished to see his pupil, waited in the anteroom in his wet aquascutum, twirling his hat in his impatient hands. The temper of the paragon was hardly at its best. It had been sorely tried of late. When he left home that morning it had been a little out of its normal plane; and now, as he sat with a pool of water forming round his feet on its descent from his clothes, he felt his vexation swell about him drop by drop, in the slow proportion of the lake upon the floor. It was an experience for one of his pontifical spirit to be kept at the door by his agent. Such a thing had not happened before. It was a trifle; yet it went against his grain like a tradesman's incivility or the familiarity of a servant. It was too impalpable to resent, yet it fretted his sensitive machinery like a speck of dust in the eye.

Our hero was well known to the clerks who thumbed their ledgers behind their lattice-work of glass. With nobody was the Guv'nor so replete with flummery, not even with the Duke, the Clergy, and Lord Croxton, as he was with this red-faced man with the big nose and the great voice who looked like a farmer. The Guv'nor gave you pins and needles all over, he fairly made you squirm, he did, when he put on his special air and buttered it

thick with this Mr. Broke of Covenden. They began to note with trepidation that a cloud was darkening the brows of the august gentleman, and that he beat his knee with his riding-crop in a manner not to be misinterpreted. At last his impatience grew so visible that one of the clerks whispered to the boy who had taken in his name—

"Porter, you told the Guv'nor it was Mr. Broke?"

"I thought he said his name was Mr. Books," said Porter nervously.

"Then the Guv'nor don't know he's 'ere! Go and tell him it's Mr. Broke, you young fool. My eye, I wouldn't be you!"

The unlucky junior, a younger son of Porter the bookseller, who had been in his present situation a fortnight, took this information to Mr. Breffit with a degree of confusion that drew broad grins from his peers. In almost the same instant that the news was communicated Mr. Breffit bounced out of his room.

"Oh, my dear Mr. Broke, how very distressing! A thousand pardons—a thousand pardons! Pray, sir, come in. I had no idea that you were waiting. That stupid boy misunderstood your name. Terribly provoking—terribly provoking! But upon my word it shall not happen again."

"Don't mention it, Breffit."

Our hero paid no particular attention to these apologies, but preferred to look steadily past the gesticulations of his agent towards Mr. Breffit the younger, who stood at the end of the room with his back to the window. He had never seen this young man before; therefore he regarded him with the full, the critically inquiring scrutiny, persons of his type feel they have a right to employ.

"My son, sir—pray allow me to do myself the honour of presenting my son."

There was a note of inexorable pride in the voice of the father. However, so fully occupied was Broke in taking the measure of the young man that this somewhat florid introduction had to be repeated twice before he grew aware of it.

"Your son, Breffit?" he said at last, "ah, yes, to be sure! I was not aware you had a boy so old. A likely

looking lad; let us hope he will make as good a man as his father."

"He will make a good deal better, sir, I hope and trust," said Mr. Breffit hastily. "My father didn't send me to Harrow and Cambridge!"

"Harrow and Cambridge; the deuce! I don't know, Breffit, that you are altogether wise there. There is always the—ah, danger that an education of—ah, that kind may give a young fellow notions above his station in life."

"In what way, sir?" asked Mr. Breffit strenuously.

"Well—ah, it may give a young fellow a distaste for the desk, don't you know?"

"I hope it may, sir. With all my heart I hope it may. He shall have nothing to do with 'shop,' if I know it. I have given him the education of a gentleman because I mean him to be a gentleman. I have more money than I know what to do with, and I mean to invest it, sir, in this boy of mine, so that he shall hold his head up with the best, and be a credit to me."

"Well, there is something in that," said our hero reluctantly.

As he spoke, however, a shade of annoyance passed across his face. Talk of this kind was painfully out of harmony with his ideas. Let the cobbler stick to his last, was one of his firmly rooted tenets. Whatever would become of that sharp but inevitable demarcation of the classes and the masses if this sort of thing went on in England, of all places in the world! It was not enough that wealthy Jews should job for a peerage and found a family upon it; but the butcher, the baker, and the candlestick-maker must bring up their sons deliberately to spurn the stool behind the parental counter, that they too might acquire this precious trick of parodying their superiors. The pious thought haunted him that it was enough to make his poor dear father turn in his grave!

Mr. Breffit, as keenly he scanned the face of this mirror of gentility to decipher the effect of his audaciousness (alas, that his instincts proclaimed it so to be!), was only too quick to detect the grim glint that flitted about it. He hastened to allay what he divined to be its cause.

"I trust you won't consider, Mr. Broke," he said, "that I have been guilty of rashness. I thought out the matter years ago, and I should certainly not have given him an education of this kind had I not intended to keep him in affluence—in affluence, sir, afterwards. You see, Mr. Broke, he is the only son I've got; he is very near and dear to me. He's my all, do you see, sir; and I want to be able to look up to him and say, in the words of Shakespeare, the immortal Bard, 'This is a Man!' And, Mr. Broke, I may tell you in confidence, between ourselves, sir, that my boy will be one of the first men in this county. It won't be up like a rocket and down like a stick with him. He will be a very rich man."

Pride and enthusiasm had seized the father. A rare scheme had been cloistered in his heart these many years. And now for the first time, as it burst into the articulate, he was overwhelmed. Yet even as the vaunts were started on his lips he was conscious that had he been in the enjoyment of that sober control, that unimpeachable sanity he had the right to look for in himself and the habit of exacting, he would never have inflicted his personal affairs on one whose condition rendered him unsympathetic. Nature, however, cannot always be the slave of policy. For once she had taken the liberty of asserting herself vehemently in Mr. Breffit. He was slightly bewildered; he was even a little frightened; he had a remote sense of humiliation. He could not escape the incongruity of Broke confronting him with compressed lips and sombre eyes. However, the power to reflect was no longer his. Nothing could stay the torrent. Vaunt came after vaunt; indiscretion succeeded indiscretion; he half-apologized, yet he half-defied as he exposed this singular ambition.

Our hero gave him an eye of oxlike solemnity. He was not accustomed to enjoy an insight into the aspirations of those who served him. He had not come there to attend a recital of old Breffit's curious ideas. Odd ideas they were too—on the verge of moonshine. Really, it was not at all like him. Rather pointedly he indicated that he was there to talk business, not to discuss the private affairs of his agent. For once, however, Mr. Breffit, the man of tact, the man with the supple back, the courtier, was

obtuse. Now that he had opened that secret door in his soul it was not easy to close it. The long-imprisoned torrent behind, once it had burst its walls, must pour out until it had run dry.

"You said just now, sir, that you didn't consider me altogether wise in putting such notions in my boy's head. But I don't think you know all the facts of the case, sir. You see, I am going to buy Tufton Hall, poor Lord Algernon's place, for my boy; and I'm going to set him up in it with ten thousand a year, ten thousand a year, Mr. Broke, of his own. And if that's not enough, he can have more, sir. I don't intend that there shall be any doubt about his position. And although he is the son of a self-made man—I know what *I* am, Mr. Broke, as well as you do—I fail to see that that should be anything to his detriment. He will have his stake in the county just the same as anybody else, although he may not, like some, be adorned with blue blood, or have a handle to his name. And I hope, sir, and trust that presently, in the fulness of time, he may marry in a direction that his means will justify, and stand for Parliament, and all that sort of thing."

The face of our hero was a study. Had his mood been lighter, he might have been content to be amused. There really was something to laugh at in an ebullition of this nature from a man whom he had known for twenty years as a sane, discreet, quiet, shrewd, modest, responsible fellow, who never once had shown a tendency to presume upon his worth. But he had no mind to be tickled by anything this morning. He was annoyed. He was annoyed in much the same way he would have been had Porson bent over his chair during dinner and whispered, "I can recommend the brown sherry, sir!" Could it be that old Breffit's mind was giving way a little? He was not so young as he was. Or again, this amazing behaviour of old Breffit's was the result, probably, of this money-curse, this itch for lucre that was turning everything topsy-turvy nowadays. And as soon as a man did get money, no matter how he got it, he gave himself airs, and seemed to expect that the mere possession of the demoralizing stuff would exalt him out of his class. As though money

made any difference. What these absurd people could not see was that a man was what he was; once a bagman, always a bagman; you could not make a silk purse out of the ear of a sow.

"Breffit," he said tartly, "I have very little time to spare, and there is something of importance I wish to talk to you about. I am afraid we must discuss it alone."

The son flushed angrily and withdrew. He was stung by the tone. He went the more hurriedly because his father, instead of resenting it, began to cringe before it, and was actually breaking forth into apologies. It shocked and hurt the son to hear him. This pompous overbearing old bird was a bit of a duke apparently. But fancy the guv'nor taking it like that! Why didn't he tell his royal highness to go to the devil? A matter of business he supposed. How fortunate he was not going into business! At that moment it came upon him with crushing force that he would have made a mighty poor hand at it. Insulting old bounder!

When the door had closed upon Mr. Breffit the younger, and Mr. Breffit the elder had been somewhat rudely summoned out of his day-dreams by the rasp in the voice of his client, Broke plunged without further preface into the matter that had carried him there.

"I am in a tight place," he said. "No. 3, Broke Street, will have to go. I should prefer to sell it."

"A great pity," said Mr. Breffit, "a great pity."

"I agree with you, but I am afraid there is no alternative. I understand that further mortgages are impossible, and by hook or by crook I must have some ready money. The only thing is to let No. 3 go the way of the rest of the street. Fifty years ago the whole was ours; yet now, as you know, this is the only house in it still remaining in our hands."

"Purchaser preferred, I believe, sir?"

"Yes; do you want to buy a town house for your son?" Our hero was guilty of a rude attempt at the ironical.

"Not at present, sir, not at present," said Mr. Breffit, flattered by the reference. "But that will come all in good time, I hope and trust. And in the meantime, sir, I think I can find a purchaser."

"You are a wonderful man, Breffit. Who, pray, is the god out of the machine?"

"Well,—er, Lord Salmon," said Mr. Breffit, with a becoming measure of hesitation. "I am sure Broke Street would suit his lordship. He is looking for a house a little more commodious and in a neighbourhood a little less doubtful than his present one in Berkeley Square. And he would prefer to buy. I happen to know he does not care to rent anything except a box at the Opera."

"Why doesn't the fellow buy Buckingham Palace?"

"Indeed, sir, why not? But perhaps the Queen wishes to retain it during her lifetime for the sake of its associations."

This absence of mental guile had been a valuable asset in Mr. Breffit's career. It was an aid and a stimulus to men of Broke's mould, who joked with difficulty, whose excursions into a ponderous humour were generally accompanied by a hammer, a box of nails, and similar instruments of a surgical nature. In the company of Mr. Breffit he was in the fortunate position of being able to rejoice at the effect of his own wit without being under the painful obligation of having to explain it.

The name of Lord Salmon was the proverbial red rag to our typical John Bull. Nothing was so distasteful to him as the mention of that peer. Even the word Radical was not such a frank offence. The fellow was always obtruding himself one way and another, and there was no end to his presumption. The effrontery that could dare to put a price on Covenden was capable of anything.

"He shall not have it."

Mr. Breffit shrugged a deprecatory shoulder in reply.

"I am afraid," he said humbly, "we are hardly in a position to be nice. We are fortunate, sir,—highly fortunate—to have even one purchaser in prospect who is at all likely to buy it on our own terms. To Lord Salmon money is no obstacle."

"So he has been good enough to say, provided a place fits his fancy," said Broke, with a grim face.

There could be no doubt that the draught was bitter. But the shrewd Mr. Breffit, old and trusted financial

family physician, was convinced that the sick man must swallow it, in spite of the faces that he made.

"Believe me, Mr. Broke," said he, "if you really must part with the house it would be suicidal—quite suicidal—to throw away a chance that is not likely to recur. Had Lord Salmon dropped from heaven, he could not have appeared at a moment more opportune."

"Devilish good of him."

The despair upon Broke's face was an acknowledgment of his own ineptitude. Circumstance had him bound hand and foot. He was as helpless as an infant whimpering in the arms of its nurse. And about as dignified. He was accustomed to consult his will alone when his self-love was touched in the least degree. He had neither the wisdom nor the humility that can yield without a groan to the inevitable. Fate might ultimately break his buckram soul in two, but it could not make it bend. By nature he was the *grand seigneur* who knew no law beyond his turbulent desires. He yearned to deal with Salmon as his fathers would have done in feudal days; he yearned to blow a shrill blast, and ride forth with his knights armed *cap-à-pie*, to pluck the head off the body of this audacious Hebrew rogue, and nail it to the gates of Covenden, a warning to mankind and the winds of heaven.

It fretted him to the soul to be at the mercy of this Jew. The nationality made the humiliation greater. He had the same fierce contempt of the Chosen People as had his ancestors of the twelfth century. Nevertheless, he must have money. It was a crude fact and a bald with which to confront an institution that had been accustomed to ignore the need for it even before the freebooters came in their galleys from France. On the face of things did it not seem ludicrous that the edifice which the accretions of time had raised about his name should dissolve on a question so sordid? What was money? It was only a symbol: the beads of the savage, the little pieces of tin of the heathen Chinee. Was ever reasonable mind beset with issue so preposterous!

"I—ah—suppose you—ah—must use your own discretion, Breffit," he said with a reluctance that made no attempt to put a gloss upon his feelings. "You—ah

—must dispose of the house to the best advantage; I—ah—leave the matter entirely to you."

The agitated gentleman mopped his head.

Now Mr. Breffit had observed the conflict in the face of his patron; and his tenderness for him was very real. Our hero's status alone made a powerful appeal to his English mind, while the fact that it was his patronage to which he owed his start in life, and the foundation upon which he had built a fortune, consolidated the sentiment he entertained for him. In a curious impersonal way he had a great reverence for Broke, and he did not esteem him less because he had such an intimate knowledge of his character. Obtuse, and somewhat limited in his mental range, Mr. Breffit was not a fool. There were certain kinds of walls through which he could see a considerable distance. He was by no means superficial in some things. He could read Broke's prejudices like a page of a newspaper.

He saw the man was bleeding internally. Never before had he seen that arbitrary pride so distressed. He could not bear to witness it.

"Mr. Broke," he said, "will you—er—permit me to make a suggestion. I daresay we can adjust this little matter without—er—having recourse to Lord Salmon. I think I see my way to taking over the house as an investment against the time when my son marries and enters Parliament."

He was prompted by one of those odd bursts of disinterestedness that may sometimes seize even your keen-spirited business man. The idea uppermost in his mind was to spare his poor client. And he would have been able so to do but for that unlucky clause in regard to his son, which was inserted as an afterthought as a sop to his own protesting instincts. Therefore the suggestion jarred upon Broke in much the same manner as that of a thrifty footman had he come forward with an offer of hard cash. It was not easy to play the philanthropist with a man of this kidney.

"My good Breffit," he said, "I leave the matter to you. It—ah—ceases to interest me."

Suddenly he laughed discordantly and turned abruptly upon his heel.

"Good morning, Breffit: Let me know the price. And remember that time means a great deal."

In this lofty fashion do the gods condescend to trade!

However, as he moved to the door, Mr. Breffit detained him.

"I have been asked, sir, whether you would accept a seat on the board of a company. If you will pardon the liberty, sir, I may say it is an easy way of earning five hundred pounds per annum. You give your name to the undertaking, and you attend so many meetings of directors, and nothing more is required. I should not have mentioned it, sir, only nowadays numbers—numbers of the best people—the very best people—do it constantly. Indeed, I can assure you, sir, it is quite the thing."

"What does your precious company call itself?"

"The Thames Valley Goldfields Syndicate, capital three millions sterling. I may say that your brother-in-law, Lord Bosket, has signified his intention of joining the board after allotment."

"Indeed; who has prevailed on him?"

"Well—er—I rather think the promoter:

"Who, pray, is the promoter?"

"—Er—Lord Salmon."

"I—ah—absolutely decline to have anything to do with it."

Our hero took a sharp step to the rain.

When Mr. Breffit had bowed the great man out of the door with effusive deference, and watched him swing into the saddle and canter away into the mists of the steaming street, he returned to his room with an air of conscious dignity, and rang the bell. It was answered by the youthful clerk who had made the egregious blunder in his pronunciation of the great man's name. Mr. Breffit put his hand in his pocket and pulled out a fistful of silver. He selected two half-crowns with elaborate gravity.

"Porter, here are a week's wages, and you are dismissed. I am sorry to say it, Porter, but you are not a youth who is at all likely to suit me. You can go. Such a thing has happened through your gross, your abominable carelessness, that has never occurred in all the time I have had up my plate. And rather than it should have occurred,

Porter, now, I would have paid you ten shillings a week for the term of your natural life. Your ways are not my ways, Porter. Porter, you and I must part. My oldest and most respected client! Mr. Broke of Covenden, of all people in the world! Go at once, Porter—go before I say something harsh."

The boy, looking very white and frightened, opened his lips to make some desperate sort of a reply. Before he could frame it, however, Mr. Breffit stopped him with a majestic finger.

"Not a word, Porter, not a word. Do not aggravate your offence by seeking to palliate it. There is nothing to be said; I would that there were. I repeat, Porter, you and I must part."

Tears were in the eyes of the boy. He murmured something, but the only words that were audible seemed to relate to his father and the disgrace.

"It *is* a disgrace," said Mr. Breffit with gusto. "That I grant you, Porter. As for your father, I have no idea what he will say, but he ought to feel it. It will not be to his credit if he does not. Ha! by the way, that reminds me. You can tell your father from me, Porter, that he is making a rod for his own back; he is storing up repentance for his old age. I understand he has sent your elder brother to Cambridge. It was brought to my notice this morning for the first time, or he could have depended on it he would have heard from me sooner. I deplore your father's conduct, Porter, I deplore it. Tell him, Porter, I deplore it. I call it effrontery, Porter, I call it effrontery. Tell your father I said that. I don't know whose son we shall see at Cambridge next. Has Gage the greengrocer sent his boy to Cambridge too, or is he wanted at the shop to take round the potatoes and the cabbages? When I was a boy Cambridge was reserved exclusively for the sons of gentlemen. This may well be called a democratic age. Impertinence, presumption; I am very much shocked. Tell your father, Porter, that I am very much shocked. But he will live to repent it; do you mark my words and see if he does not. I never yet saw a man give false ideas to his children, and seek to exalt them above their condition, who did not live

to rue the day. And tell your father, Porter, that he will receive no pity from me when that has come to pass. Now go; and mind you do not apply to me for a character."

Very pale and bewildered, the boy placed the five shillings in his pocket and withdrew. He put on his out-of-doors coat and his mackintosh, tucked his office coat under his arm, and went forth mechanically in the direction of his father's bookshop. He was as stunned as though he had received a blow on the head; he could think of nothing; and although it was pouring with rain, and every now and then the wind dashed it against his eyes, he stood gazing a full quarter of an hour into a window that was formerly a pastrycook's, which being now to let, had not even a stale pie to relieve its desolation.

CHAPTER VI

Foreshadows the Need for a Hero and a Heroine

WHEN Broke rode home care still sat behind the horseman. A closed carriage, drawn by a fine pair of horses, surmounted by a coachman and footman in cockades and white mackintoshes, rolled up and down in the rain before his door. He did not need to look at the coronet stamped upon the lozenge of this vehicle to learn to whom it belonged. It was more familiar to him than consisted with his peace of mind. It belonged as unmistakably to his sister-in-law as the pair of serious gentlemen upon the box-seat proclaimed by the angle at which they carried their noses that they were part and parcel of the Upper Ten.

He entered the dining-room to discover his family at luncheon. To-day there was no meet of the Parkshire hounds; therefore the solace was accorded him of his wife, his six daughters and Lord and Lady Bosket.

"We are taking luncheon a little earlier to-day, Edmund," said his wife. "There is a meeting of the Cuttisham Temperance Society at the Town Hall at a quarter to three. Emma is going to preside."

"Supported by me," said Lord Bosket in a somewhat low-spirited manner. "Lucky me; doosid nice to be me, what?"

"Charles," said Lady Bosket, sticking out her chin and focussing her glasses six inches from her nose, "I do not think your sense of propriety is quite so keen as it should be."

"Hear, hear," said Lord Bosket dismally, as he poured a little soda water into his whisky.

Lady Bosket was a tall, gaunt woman with craggy features and high cheek-bones. Her mien, colouring and contour curiously recalled the wasp; and at least many a poor fly scuttled at her approach. Her countenance, however, the dial of her noble mind, might be compared to that of a hen. Not one of your plebeian barn-door species be it known, but rather a variety of game-fowl, a very superior, high-stepping hen. Superiority indeed was her prevailing note, the key in which she had been conceived. Everything about her proclaimed it. Whether it was the way in which she wore her back hair, or the prose with which she enriched our literature; her opinions or her petticoats; the carriage of her carnal body or the conduct of her immortal soul; her table manners or her attitude towards religion, she was invariably *une précieuse* who did not cease in her endeavour to convey the impression that although for the time being she might be in, she certainly was not of, the particular company in which she had the misfortune to find herself. Neither talents nor integrity were secure against her patronage; and so great was her passion to be other than her peers that in hell she would have been an angel, while in heaven she would have been a devil.

It was reserved, however, for her voice to be her crowning glory. As a peal of bells may enhance the nobility of a cathedral, whatever the splendours of its architecture or the venerable aggregation of its years, so that remarkable mechanism gave the last touch to the personality of this lady. And to pursue the sacred figure to which we have ventured to compare her, which after all is the one designed to please her most, her voice, like that of your cathedral, was right up at the top. There never was a voice in the world that was poised on such a dizzy altitude. Ghent, Bruges, Milan, Cologne, York Minster, S. Peter's at Rome muffle their ineffectual music before this surprising organ. True its owner carried her head very high, but how she kept up her voice in that latitude was a secret known only to nature. It was an instrument peculiar to itself; ransack earth and heaven and it would yet remain

unmatched. It is fitting, perhaps, that Lord Bosket should bear his testimony. No one has acquired the right to speak concerning it so fully as the gentleman, her husband; and certainly no one employed his right with a more graphic fervour. The law of his country had ordained that he should dwell with it apart for many years.

"The first time you hear the voice of the missis," says our epigrammatist, "a sudden sort of feeling comes over you, don't you know, that your money's on the wrong hoss. The second time you hear it you want to commit a murder. The third time you understand why a dog howls. The fourth time the referee counts you out, up goes the sponge, and you ask to go home."

Happily the theme of conversation at the luncheon table was of the first importance, and less likely to incur those checks which more trivial ones were apt to provoke.

"Edmund," said Lady Bosket, "I congratulate you upon this affair of Billy and Miss Wayling. It is so clever of Jane. It is a *coup*, Edmund, it is a *coup*. I am sure I personally am much relieved; it takes quite a load of responsibility off the shoulders of us all."

"You will understand, Emma, of course that nothing is settled yet," said Mrs. Broke placidly. "At present it would be premature to take it as an accomplished fact."

"People are talking of nothing else," said Lady Bosket. "Everybody agrees that it is such a providential thing. One smiles to think how many times one has been congratulated personally on one's freedom now from anxiety. People are unanimous, Jane, in saying that your cleverness is *inordinate*. One may well be lost in admiration of your finesse, particularly as it is known that Wimbledon had decided to marry her."

"It was good luck mostly," said Mrs. Broke. "I believe the child has a genuine liking for Billy. Of course she has known him for years, and Colonel Rouse, her guardian, has been a true friend."

"It would be too much to hope that Billy has a liking for her," said Lady Bosket. "That would be too much like a novel, would it not?"

"Has it never struck you, Emma," said Mrs. Broke demurely, "that mutual affection comes after marriage

as a rule. All the most perfectly harmonious unions I know have begun in that way. Surely it is better that marriage should be entered into on the ground of common tolerance rather than that of passion. It is so much safer, so very much safer. Do you know, Emma, I am inclined to consider it not the smallest part of our good fortune that Billy is at present so lukewarm. The warmth of Maud's attachment almost alarms me. Before marriage an exhibition of affection afflicts one with a slight sense of its incongruity. One feels it to be a slight forcing of the note."

"How does it strike you afterwards?" Lord Bosket asked.

"You are a cynic, Charles," said Mrs. Broke playfully. "You should be like Diogenes and live in a tub."

"Wish I could," said her brother with a sigh. "Pretty good judge of the game, that chap. No room for two in his little box."

"I am immensely satisfied with girls of the Miss Wayling type," said Lady Bosket in her most detached voice. "She is such a beautiful intellectual creature, and very finely chiselled. She has that statuesque marble purity which is really quite impregnated with Greek feeling. It refreshes one's aching senses to gaze on a creature so coldly, so chastely classical after they have been wearied by a surfeit of the animal, "horsey," *fin de siècle* women that one is confronted with everywhere at the present day."

Lady Bosket paused to put up her glasses, and ingeniously manipulated them in such a manner that she could stare at all her six nieces at once. Five of them quailed and lowered their scarlet faces to their plates before the extraordinary resolution of her gaze, but Joan the eldest, the one with the Roman spirit, happened to be drinking a glass of water. She suspended that operation for a moment and met her aunt's insolent scrutiny with a fearless one of her own.

"Aunty means that for you little gells," said their tender-hearted but very tactless uncle Charles, who was so sensitive that anything that gave pain to objects for which he had an affection, hurt him also. "That's a dig at you; but don't you mind it; I don't; it's only her fun. I'll bring you some chocolate creams to-morrow; you know—

the sort in the pink boxes tied with blue string. And I'll lend you Bobtail when she gets her leg all right."

He sighed, and reflectively helped himself to whisky.

"Charles," said Lady Bosket, "you have already partaken of four glasses of whisky during luncheon. I must ask you in the name of decency to keep, in my presence at least, not to mention the presence of Jane and the girls, a check upon your diseased appetite."

This fiat was accompanied with much preening of plumage. The stately lady then sat up more rigidly in her chair with an air of satisfaction that had something in common with that of an owl in a ruin who has just eaten a bat.

"Damn it," said Lord Bosket pensively.

He proceeded to pour out soda-water into a clean glass. But presently having drunk that unsatisfactory beverage, in a fit of absence of mind he raised the first tumbler containing the forbidden whisky to his lips, and drank it neat. Fortunately Lady Bosket was too much occupied with the part she was sustaining in the conversation to observe this lapse.

It was Mrs. Broke's constant aim when these near relations sat at her table to remain a neutral and to steer the talk into channels unvexed by the waters of controversy.

"What is going to be done with Tufton? have you heard, Mun?" she asked, assuming a sudden air of animation.

"Breffit told me this morning that he was going to buy it," said Broke.

"For whom?"

"For his son."

"For his son!"

Mrs. Broke's face was frankly incredulous.

"Who, pray, is Breffit?" asked Lady Bosket.

"Surely you know Breffit, the land agent," said Broke. "I thought everybody knew old Breffit. He is a character."

Lady Bosket reflected with the aid of her glasses.

"The weird old gentleman who embellishes his person with a tall hat, a white waistcoat, brown boats and a frock coat, and is said to wear a wig," said Mrs. Broke. "In his way he is a celebrity."

"Oh—h," said Lady Bosket drawing a deep breath.

"The old gentleman who always peers very hard into one's face and seems as though he is about to burst into tears when he talks to one," said Mrs. Broke with a smile. "The old gentleman who has ideas of his own on the use and abuse of the letter 'h.'"

"*That* man," said Lady Bosket. "Do you mean to tell *me* he has bought Tufton, that poor Algernon's people have had since the time of Charles the Second, and that he proposes to put his son in it?"

"I do," said Broke grimly. "He was good enough to tell me this morning that he was going to set his son up in the ah—county in such a manner that he—ah could hold his head up with the best——"

"Don't, my dear Edmund, don't!" implored Lady Bosket piteously as with a grimace she elevated her high shoulders and pressed her fingers to her sensitive ears. "Spare us the cant terms of the snobocracy."

"I am only repeating his words," said Broke with a cold chuckle. "I had the honour of an introduction to the young man this morning."

"My *dear* Edmund!" said Lady Bosket.

"I daresay Mr. Breffit intends that you shall be his sponsor in his progress through the purlieus of the social world," said Mrs. Broke, expanding her smile. "When the worst comes to the worst and we are cast penniless upon the streets, as I suppose we must be in the end, we shall be able to keep body and soul together by playing Mentor to these youthful Telemachuses. You, my dear Edmund, will be allotted the department for the Social Advancement of the sons of Local Tradespeople, while I can open a Bureau for the Presentation at Court of the American Miss, with auxiliary branches for the Polishing of Popper and Mommer. And I can fill up the rest of my time with the introduction into Good Society of All and Sundry; and you, my dear Edmund, can fill up yours by being a director of Limited Liability Companies under the aegis of our friend Lord Salmon, which reminds me, Edmund, that I have already made a promise to him that you will accept a seat on the Board of the Thames Valley Goldfields Syndicate, in consideration of which charming piece of condescension

your means are to be augmented to the extent of five hundred pounds a year. From which, Emma, you will gather that, desperately reduced as we are, we are not wholly without resources."

"I protest, Jane, you are growing quite debased," said her sister-in-law.

"Mrs. Chapone informs us it is vulgar to make use of a proverbial expression, but needs must when the devil drives," said Mrs. Broke meekly.

"What is that, Jane?" Broke interposed gruffly. "You have made a promise to—ah, that fellow Salmon? Why Breffit approached me this morning on—ah, that very subject, and I refused point blank. Do you expect me to engage my name with that of a Jew? What are you thinking of, woman?"

"The butcher and the baker, the rates and the taxes. You must come off the high horse, my dear, you must indeed. As I have been pointing out to you so often lately, you can no longer afford to ride the noble quadruped. Five hundred a year *is* five hundred a year to paupers like ourselves. Lord Salmon has very kindly promised to come this afternoon to discuss the subject with you."

"I decline to see him."

"Don't be more impracticable, my love, than you can help."

"Shorten rein a bit, Edmund," interposed Lord Bosket. "Salmon is not such a bad feller. People can say what they like, but you can take it from me that Salmon's all right. He preserves his foxes and lays down his pheasants, and he doesn't play a bad hand at bridge. The feller's all right, I tell you; it's not fair to ask more of any man. He don't pretend to be an Assheton Smith in the saddle; and when he does bag a keeper he always does the handsome thing. Nobody can deny that he drives good cattle, aye, and owns it too, and he pays his footin' to the Hunt like a sportsman."

"He paid his footing to the peerage too. No—ah, Salmons for me, thank you."

"Woa, easy, easy!" said Lord Bosket in the caressing voice he used to his alarmed young horses when they pricked up their ears and pranced before the motor car:

you had better send her to me at Grosvenor Street, and I will put her through myself."

"How good of you, my dear!"

"Hold up your head, child."

Lady Bosket raised her glasses into position and stared at her youngest niece with a concentrated directness that Delia found to be embarrassing. She was much more delicately fibred, far timider than her sisters.

"Rather nice eyes," said her aunt. "The child blushes too much, although in a young girl that may sometimes be reckoned an asset. The Broke nose is not quite so much in evidence as in the others, but still there is more than enough of it. Edmund, I always say that the Broke nose is incomparably the ugliest thing that was ever borne about by a human being. I rather like the child's mouth. That long upper lip is sometimes effective. I do not like her chin. But take her in the lump I should be inclined to say that she is less strikingly ugly than any of them. Probably a little deficient in character. And she is shockingly dressed. The cut of that coat is horrible. Why will you not send them to Redfern, Jane? It is unfit for a housemaid, and it is atrociously put on. The child is a bad shape. Those shoulders—those ridiculous shoulders! See that she wears a backboard, Jane, and lies on her back four hours a day. Her hair is done in the most slovenly manner. You must dismiss her maid. I hope the child has clean finger-nails."

At this point Lady Bosket lowered her glasses.

"Have you attended to her manner, Jane? I hope it is not *gauche* nor *triste*, nor *ingénue*. I positively forbid it to be *ingénue*. A good manner is worth something in these days. Most people do not know there is such a thing. They consider they have only to talk at the top of their voices and to stare as hard as they can to supply the deficiency. I will say this for the girls, their manner is generally above criticism. A manner grows rarer every year among the young. I suppose the girls inherit it from you, Jane. Yours was always excellent; so different from Charles'."

"Itsh a lie, my dears. Don't you believe her," Lord Bosket mumbled.

"If I betray this interest in the child," Lady Bosket continued, "I make one condition, Jane. I shall have her educated. The child must not remain a cross between a dunce and an idiot. I shall insist on her having ideas above horseflesh."

"You can do as you like, my dear, if only you are disposed to pay the piper. With Billy in the Blues it is impossible for us to spend another farthing on the girls."

"Very well, as I have not a girl of my own the child shall be my concern. But I make it a condition that I have an absolutely free hand. It will be a luxury to have one niece endowed with a culture a little more liberal than that of her sisters; a niece who in time may hope to distinguish between the differential calculus and the tail of a horse. I will enter her at Newnham College."

"The wretched child would never be able to pass the preliminary examination," said her mother, laughing. "Her mind at present is about equal to that of a well-developed mouse."

"That can be remedied. She must have a coach. Fortunately I know of a man; quite a deserving person I believe, who by his industry has raised himself from behind the counter of his father's bookshop in Cuttisham to taking a course at the university. I am told he has acquitted himself with distinction, and that presently he may look for election to a fellowship of his college. In a sense I regard him as a *protégé* of my own, for when he served behind the counter of his father's shop I was pleased by his honest face and unassuming manners. He also appeared to possess a knowledge, so rare in a bookseller, of the wares he sold. It was on my advice I believe that his father consented to his going to Cambridge. Results have justified my interest, and they redound to the young man's credit."

"Will not his youth be in the nature of a drawback?"

"Not at all; it will be more than compensated for by his station in life. Of course one has heard of horrible cases where unscrupulous adventurers have played havoc in the best regulated families. But surely one can assume that a person of this kind will be quite safe."

"This optimism is unlike you, Emma," said Mrs. Broke, with a stealthy pleasure.

"I am not so hide-bound with prejudice as most people who live in the country. My outlook is a little wider in these things. I hold that the masses should be trusted up to a certain point, and in chosen instances opportunities should be granted to them. My dear friend, the late Mr. Gladstone, was always a firm believer in that. The case of this worthy fellow is one for encouragement; besides the danger does not exist. From the merely physical standpoint he is not alluring."

"I would not be too sure about danger not existing, Emma, if I were you," said our hero, chuckling grimly at the conceit. "There's no saying what things are coming to nowadays. You can't make them out. In fact it is my opinion the old sharply defined distinctions are disappearing."

With this brief but wonderfully penetrating expression of his wisdom our hero again relapsed upon silence.

"My dear Edmund, how extravagantly clever of you," said Mrs. Broke, looking from her husband to her sister-in-law with pensive amusement. She was still regarding the unconscious pair in this manner when the butler came into the room. He bent over her chair.

"Lord Salmon to see you, ma'am."

Broke pricked his ears.

"You are not at home, Jane," he said shortly.

She lifted to him her baffling smile.

"On the contrary, I particularly want to see him; and I want you, my dear, particularly to see him too. Bring his lordship in here, Porson, if you please." And as the butler went forth on his mission, "It is rather unnecessary of our friend to call at this hour. But as he is worth six millions one must ascribe it to his force of character. He is capable of calling at three o'clock in the morning if he felt inclined. Still one cannot have too much indulgence for six millions; and after all he may not have read *Manners for Millionaires* or *Croesus and Courtesy*."

Although this prattle was designed to fill the arid pause that heralded Lord Salmon's announcement, Broke

glared stonily, and Lady Bosket was able to say before he came in—

"Jane, I wish you to understand that I stay under protest, and out of curiosity. This is not a precedent. I am seriously offended that you should think fit to receive a person of this sort while I am at your table. I do not know when I have been so hurt. It is only because I have heard so much about the man that I choose to remain and see for myself. He enjoys a most unenviable notoriety. But on no account, Jane, are you to introduce him unless I ask you to do so."

Mrs. Broke sat as grave as a church, but suddenly her amused eyes began to dance in the oddest manner.

The door opened again.

"Lord Salmon," said the butler.

CHAPTER VII

Le Nouveau Régime

SAUL SALMON, first baron of the name, had a type of countenance likely to excite racial prejudice. His nose was a sufficient guarantee of his nationality. He was fat to the verge of the obscene. His picture in the newspapers inferred a composite photograph of M. Dumas the Elder, and the Tichborne Claimant. His hair was black, curly, and abundant, his lips like a negro's, his eyes a bilious yellow; while his coarse but powerful mouth was stamped with a double-chin of ponderous dimension. His olive tawny skin shone with addiction to the pleasures of the table.

A creature more fantastically unlike your gentleman of England of whom an English peer is allowed to be the mirror, would not be easy to conceive. There was not a trace about him of that Red Indian reticence which is said to stamp our caste. There was effusiveness in the tawny hue of him, in his greasy smiles, in his movements, his looks, his manner of speaking; effusiveness hand in hand with affability; effusiveness cheek by jowl with an impregnable belief in Saul Salmon, that fair work of God.

He seemed hardly to know whom to admire most—himself or the radiant persons he saw around him. He seemed to exude an air of patronage, so pleased he was with all the charming people it was his happiness to meet. What you thought of him did not matter; it was not to the point; it was enough that he was perfectly satisfied with you: a man of a Homeric kidney, if ever there was one in the world. In his large redundant self-sufficiency the little winged barbs which in the terminology of our civili-

cation are called " snubs " sank and were lost, like stones in a morass. He was born to conquer, to overcome; even the organized disapproval of the Pharisees was powerless before such a self-esteem.

When this ponderous gentleman entered the room grunting in his progress, and bowing to left and to right in the fashion of majesty walking in the midst of the populace, Mrs. Broke gave him a hand of a quite peculiar grace. However, such a reception was a little discounted by the coldness of her husband's nod. Lady Bosket raised her glasses, lowered her eyelashes, and favoured him with a stare of extraordinary resolution; while Lord Bosket, who by now was sinking rapidly into the condition which from time immemorial has been the source of our national humour, jerked his head in a salute in the fraternal fashion of the red-nosed comedian, sacred to the music-hall stage.

" How do, Bos.!" said Lord Salmon.

" How do, Fishy!" said Lord Bosket, reciprocally waving his glass. " Chin, chin!"

The true inwardness, the real significance of this mystic utterance being denied to Lady Bosket, a shudder might have been seen to invest the form of the stately woman. However, as one who has had an awkward fall feels compelled, on being assisted to her feet, to utter some common-place for the reassurance of the lookers-on and the vindication of her shattered self, so Lady Bosket at this moment felt called upon to demonstrate that she was undaunted still, and that, although very much shaken, she was far from dead. She turned to the niece who had the fearful honour to sit beside her, and said in a voice not quite so loud as usual—

" I sometimes think if your Uncle Charles was not the head of one of the best families in England he would be the *commonest* man in the world."

In the meantime Mrs. Broke, with that almost cynical supineness she could display when she had a purpose to serve by it, had prevailed in unctuous accents on Lord Salmon to exchange his hat for a seat at the luncheon table.

" You must please forgive us, my dear Lord Salmon," she said with a solicitude that encroached upon flattery,

"if we should seem a little peremptory. The fact is, Lady Bosket and myself are pledged to be at Cuttisham Town Hall at a quarter to three, to attend a meeting of the Temperance Society."

"I'm goin' too," said Lord Bosket. "Drink is the curshe of this country. We musht put it down."

Lord Bosket winked at nobody in particular with great solemnity, as a concession to this piece of humour, which, for some occult reason, had not met with the acclamation he felt it merited.

"Don't mention it, ma'am," said Lord Salmon. "Temperance —excellent work—like a cheque?"

"My *dear* Lord Salmon," said Mrs. Broke, "indeed I can say of my own knowledge it is a very well administered and deserving charity. Really, my dear Lord Salmon, you really are——"

"Don't mention it, ma'am," said Lord Salmon. "Fix the figure."

"How does a hundred guineas strike you?" said Mrs. Broke, beaming upon the eminent financier.

"Make it two, ma'am, make it two; it's all the same to me. I spend fifty thousand a year on advertisement."

"Well, my dear Lord Salmon, if you positively insist upon it," said the gracious lady.

Without more ado Lord Salmon took a cheque-book and a fountain-pen from the breast-pocket of his coat, and drew upon himself to the extent of two hundred and ten pounds in Mrs. Broke's favour. While this operation was being performed Broke and Lady Bosket gazed piteously at one another across the white expanse of tablecloth, somewhat after the fashion of two belated missionaries who, by stress of circumstances, are compelled to sit down among cannibals and take a little something to eat.

When Lord Salmon had written the cheque he looked up to encounter the arctic glance of Lady Bosket. Her glasses stuck out perfectly rigid in front of her. She was engaged in staring at him, through him, above him, past him, and round about him generally—a remarkable feat she accomplished with the aid of a complete vacancy of expression which implied that he was not there at all. But your Titan of commerce, your brilliant and audacious

business man, your millionaire with his patent of nobility already snug in his pocket, is not a person to be overcome by a look. There was not a hole in his armour. Cheque-book in hand he did not flinch from anything. Cheque-book in hand he was ready to meet a god, a devil, or even a woman.

"Ha, Lady B.," he said with an affability that almost made her whine, "delighted! Knew we were bound to meet. Know you by name of course; see your picture in the papers every week. Beautiful work that last book of yours—what's the name of it?—I forget. Can't say I've read it myself, no time for reading you know, but Lady Salmon's read it. Charmed with it, delighted with it, and declares it is quite equal to anything by Marie Corelli. That's not mere flattery, I assure you; very sincere woman my wife, and if she likes a thing she doesn't hesitate to say so. She is very anxious to know you; very disappointed you don't call on her, for she has quite made up her mind to like you, in spite of your reputation. You've a friend in Lady S. I can tell you; she believes in you. Thinks you are misrepresented, thinks you are misunderstood. Prophet without honour don't you know. Why don't you come and see us? only too delighted to see you at Toplands any time. Bring Bos. Know Bos. very well of course; old friends, aren't we, old son? Had one or two amusing nights together in town, hadn't we old boy? If Bos. hadn't been on very good terms with the police, we might have been unable to keep our names out of the newspapers once or twice. Golden rule always to stand well with the police. Fact I assure you, ha, ha, ha! Not but what Bos. and I were all right personally. It was those rowdy young uns, ha, ha, ha! Mind you come over to Toplands, Lady B.; come and dine with us, or come and stay a fortnight."

Lady Bosket turned to the butler at this point, and said in a very loud voice—

"Porson, my carriage."

"Yes, my lady," said Porson in an awe-stricken whisper.

The majestic woman rose, and without vouchsafing a word to anybody, or a single look to the right or to the left, marched straight out of the room. She carried her glasses

rigidly in front of her, as a sacred emblem is borne before a deity. A silence that could be felt prevailed round the luncheon table, while carriage wheels were heard to approach on the gravel of the drive, and presently were heard dramatically to die away.

As the noise of wheels receded slowly up the avenue, Lord Bosket lifted his head to listen earnestly. He drew a deep breath.

"That's all right," he said with a sombre joy. "No foolin' in the paddock this time. She's off. I will say this for the old gell: when she breaks the tape, and gets right away, you feel a happier and better feller. You feel stronger; sort of Richard-is-himself-again feelin' don't you know. Porson, put some more poison into this jar. And mind which; you must ha' got the other from a chemist."

He then turned to Lord Salmon. As usual, he was prepared to apologise humbly for the misdemeanours of his wife, lest anybody's feelings should be hurt.

"You mustn't mind the Missis, Fishy. It's only her fun. You'll get used to it, same as I have, when you know her. This mornin' she *is* a bit uppish even for her. It's all that new book. Whenever she brings one out she cackles over it, like a hen when it lays an egg. The *Spectator's* given her a leadin' article this week, and backs her for the Immortal Stakes. I wish she would run 'em now. There might be a bit of a chance then for a poor old blighter like me. But don't you mind her, Fishy, there's a good feller, don't you mind her; and I'll give you an absolute certainty for the March Handicap. Swinburne II, Fishy; have a bit on both ways. I had it from the owner. I've got a monkey on myself."

Out came Lord Salmon's pocket-book, and he wrote down the information laboriously, after inquiring how to spell the name of the horse.

"Right you are, Bos.," said he, "and you shall have a 'pinch' too, my boy. Bull California Canned Pears, Iridescent Soap Bubbles, and Mars and Jupiter Rails."

It was now the turn of Lord Bosket's pocket-book to appear; and it is to be observed that Mrs. Broke produced memoranda of her own. Her brother's "absolute certainties" had now and then an unfortunate habit of

culminating in a non-starter; but direct information from a prince among company promoters was a horse of another colour.

All this time Broke had not favoured his guest with a word, and had merely ignored him. Long ago he had made up his mind with the deliberation that is the first attribute of justice. His verdict was given once and for all; even to soften or modify it was not possible to that arbitrary spirit. Salmon struck to the roots of its deepest convictions. Salmon was reactionary, a throwing-back into the barbarous ages when Jack was as good as his neighbour. Where was our vaunted civilization when one of this kidney stepped impudently into our nice society, fraternized with us and claimed equality? Radical Governments might have no sense of decency, but they should see, confound them! that there were people in the world who had. That infernal fellow Gladstone, with his Franchises and Universal Suffrages, had something to answer for. Here in the person of this man Salmon was the plain answer to the fanatics who put the key in the hands of the masses with which to open the door of the House of Commons. The sight of this fat Jew ruffling it in a Radical coronet made his gorge rise. They could not even respect the sanctity of the peerage, curse them! Thank God, his old father was not in that room now. He would have been inclined to lift him out of doors on the top of his boot, lord or no lord. Such persons had to be shown that money was not everything. You could see by the way the fellow flaunted his cheque-book that he felt that money was the master of the world. He would have to be taught better. He would have to be taught that there were things money was powerless to buy.

Mrs. Broke, however, was as bold as she was shrewd. Therefore, however egregious our hero's attitude towards Lord Salmon, she did not deviate an inch from the course she had marked out as compatible with their interests. She informed that benevolent peer that Broke had accepted a seat on the Board of the Thames Valley Goldfields Syndicate.

He rubbed his hands.

"Excellent!" he said. "Felt sure you would, my

dear Broke, felt sure you would. Fact is, you get something for nothing, and even the British aristocracy don't object to that—what? Wonderful magnetic qualities in money—what? They say time is the great alchemist, but personally I place my trust in money. I could have put lots of my friends in, of course; but now I've my stake in the country and a seat in the Lords, I must look after my order. It seems a pity that people like you, blue-blooded, stiff-necked old county bigwigs, who have taken such pains to make the old island what it is, should have to go to the wall now it begins to pay its way. It seems hard. Besides, the country wants you Broke my boy. You give her tone; you keep her straight; you put on the brake and steer her into a convenient ditch when her rider's feet are off the pedals, and she is coming downhill a purler. I can afford to have whims, and one among them is to keep your breed upon the land. You are good for the soil, nearly as good as manure.

"Now I've staked out a pretty big claim in this island, I don't mind confessing; and in giving you a leg up I am lending a hand to myself. People call me a philanthropist. Don't you believe them. I don't part with a penny unless I see a chance of making twopence, You'll own I'm frank. It pays to be; else I should carry my tongue in my cheek with the rest of my synagogue. There are too many simpering fools tip-toeing about the globe at the present time, aping humility and pretending to be what they are not, for your charlatan to get a very fat living nowadays. Competition has killed that game. Pharisaism is played out. If it were not, I should have stuck a new Exeter Hall in the middle of Piccadilly before now, and changed the Empire into a tabernacle, and added tambourines and skirts to the ballet, and made a Hallelujah Chorus of it, and incorporated the *Pink'Un* with the *Methodist Recorder*. Make people a present of your measure, and they respect you; but let them take it for themselves, and they are too flushed with their own cleverness to think of yours. But this is talk; I must be going; I have to catch the three-twenty to town. You don't fancy me much at present, my dear Broke, but give me a fair chance, and you'll take to me better in time. A fair chance is all I ask, and I'll

lay the odds you'll be the first to own up that there is something after all in brains and money. For I like you, you blue-blooded old Roman; we must keep your breed alive in the island. And I'm going to make it my business to see that we do. Good-day everybody. I hope, ma'am, you will call on Lady S. She'll be charmed."

At the conclusion of this somewhat singular harangue, which was very rapidly delivered, Lord Salmon rose at once and with an exquisitely frank and cordial wave of the hand, grunted, and waddled his way out of the room.

"Rum beggar," reflected Lord Bosket upon his retirement. "But he's a sportsman from his head to his houghs. He's not such a bad sort, neither. He talks sense. Don't be so damned uppish Edmund, but give the feller a chance. It's all he asks for; he means well. He's no fool; he says what he means and means what he says. I've seen worse than that fat feller—lots! What's your opinion, Jane? Give us your opinion; you've a doosid sight more brains than I have or Edmund either for that matter. Dam sight too clever you are, my gell."

Mrs. Broke laughingly declined to be drawn.

Luncheon over, she announced her intention of setting forth to Cuttisham Town Hall, in the wake of the outraged Emma.

"Charles, you are coming, of course," she said to her brother slyly. "You have promised to support Emma on the platform."

"Go hon!" said Lord Bosket, leering at the glass in his hand. "I should look well, I should, stuck up on a pedestal among sky-pilots and people. It's a thousand to five Emma would give 'em the tip, and they'd point at me as an awful example, and ask me to be saved."

"But you promised to support her."

"She'll be able to support herself all right. She's in good talkin' fettle to-day; and she's got a bit of steam to work off over this Salmon job. Splendid that was. Did you see her old beak go up, and her top-knot begin to nod? I thought she'd burst. I was really sorry for her, dear old thing! But I wish Fishy could have had about five minutes of her at her best, bless her! Lord-love-a-duck! won't she give it tongue this afternoon! Talk about her

friend the late Mr. G. —the old man would not be in it with the old dutch. After all, I'm not sure that I wouldn't like a nice safe reserved seat in the stalls. What price the bishop in his mutton-chop whiskers, and his eyeglass, and his rabbit-skin overcoat? You'll be impressed, cockie, won't you! Pronounce the benediction in a deep bass voice—what?"

"Charles, Charles!" cried his sister waving an admonitory finger. His condition had proved to be rather more imminent than she had guessed.

"She's got her speech type-written very nicely," said Lord Bosket, declining to be suppressed. "'Fragrant and pellucid English' is what she calls it. Not a bad name that. She's already opened two bazaars with it, and laid a foundation stone, to say nothing of bun-worries and Sunday School treats. Funny idea some people have of a treat. Not but what she's not clever you know in her way—devilish clever. You can't help but admire the old gell. It all reads as right as rain, with lots of quotations, and so on. Give the old dutch her due, she's clever in her way. They tell me this new book is as good as Shakespeare. The newspapers write leadin' articles about her, and send sportsmen in frock coats and top-hats to interview her in her home. Good old home! She don't neglect the main chance either. She makes a lot more at her game than I do out of racin' I can tell you. Only last week she bought herself a new tiara out of her tract to the Submerged Tenth."

Mrs. Broke deemed it expedient to set out without her brother, and resigned him to the care of her husband. After smoking their cigars they went forth to walk round the farm.

The day being wet, the girls spent the afternoon in the room dedicated to their use. They called it their den. The name was appropriate, for had it been in the occupation of the brute creation its disorder could hardly have been more complete. This temple of Diana was decorated with emblems of the chase in many shapes and forms. Boots, coats and hats; sticks, whips and spurs; gloves, fragments of stirrup-leathers and bridles; saddles and odd pieces of harness; bits, chains and horseshoes; wash-leather,

brown polish and varnish, odds and ends of every conceivable sort were tumbled in heaps all over the room. Mingled with these delectable things were implements for the pumping of pneumatic tyres; bolts, screws and handle-bars; skates, hockey sticks and leg-guards; guns, cartridges and cart-grease; poles and fishing-rods, reels, flies and tackle; cricket-balls, bats and wickets; in fact, almost every weapon that becomes the hand of woman.

The walls were furnished with prints of a pronounced sporting character, and with the heads and brushes of defunct foxes. These were very numerous and very dusty; and they clustered so thickly all over the place, that the first impression it conveyed was of a furrier's shop. A moment for reflection, and it would probably be amended to that of a marine-store dealer.

Under each of these trophies a label was affixed, bearing in a carefully executed juvenile handwriting the date, where found, the place of the kill, and the precise length of time in which the run was accomplished. Over the fireplace were pictures of their father in pink, seated on Merryleg; of the meet of the Parkshire on the lawn of their residence, with Joan quite a grown up young lady on a cob, and Harriet and Philippa looking quite silly on ponies, with their hair down their backs; while a third was a framed list of the subscribers to the testimonial to E. W. A. C. B. Broke, Esq., M.P., J.P., D.L., M.F.H., which took the form of a service of plate, and a salad-bowl for Mrs. Broke, on the occasion of his relinquishing the mastership of the East Parkshire Hounds.

There were also various portraits of their Uncle Charles. One was a picture in colours from a newspaper called *Vanity Fair*, with the name of "Spy" in the corner, in which their Uncle Charles appeared in full fig with a horn and a very long whip under his arm, and a distinctly red nose, with his hands thrust deep in his pockets and just that kind-hearted melancholy look about him that they knew, and loved so well. And although the artist had drawn him such a funny shape, and painted his nose very much redder than it really was, somehow it was for all the world like him, surrounded by dogs, with his legs straddled apart very wide, and dogs in between them, one of which

they were certain was meant for "Pitcher," and another for "Ballyhoolly." This cherished picture was entitled "Bos." Then there was another, a more faithful and formal sort of likeness. It was hardly so amusing and not so true to life as the coloured one, which could almost make you laugh and cry. In fact this was not a bit like him really, for all he looked so fine. It was from the *Country Gentleman*, and was called the "Master of the Parkshire."

Immediately below these pictures of their Uncle Charles a piece of newspaper was affixed, a whole page torn from a weekly journal. It was of a recent date; a vigorously written article, called "The Trick Exposed." It began: "We have never been asked to dinner by Lady Bosket." It proceeded to criticise their Aunt Emma and her writings in a very frank and contemptuous spirit. It called her the Apostle of Dulness without Indecency. It called her the Apostle of the Ultra-Respectable, the apostle of that mediocrity with a touch of pomp in it that was so highly valued in England. It said there was not a single thought embodied in all the writings of her ladyship which did not come of a very old family. It further said there was not a single thought in her writings that had not been better expressed by people nearly as well connected. It said the so-called severe refinement of her style might have incurred the danger of being mistaken for a colourless nakedness had it not worn a coronet to cover its poverty. That was only one of the clever witty things it said. There were places where it was flippant to their aunt; places where it chaffed her; places where it said for all her pose, her pretension, and her coronet, they could not save her from belonging to the category of Mrs. This, and Miss That, and the army of matrons and spinsters of mature life, who, instead of writing with the vulgar pen and ink of common people, wrote with singleness of aim and loftiness of purpose. Like those good ladies, said this wicked delightful newspaper, she would be doing more for the amelioration of mankind if she would lay down her pen and take to darning her husband's socks. Fancy Aunt Emma darning Uncle Charles' socks! They had drawn a double line in red ink under that. They were sure the writer must have known Aunt Emma personally to have

got in such a splendid stroke. And the notice concluded in these words. "So long as to be dull is to be respectable, so long as a solemn decorum in art and life passes for wisdom and mastery, so long as fatuity passes for strength, sterility of soul for refinement of emotion, vacancy of mind for a hyper-culture, so long as we as a nation take Mediocrity, however flat, stale and unprofitable it be, for our fetish, so long must we endure the standards the Lady Boskets of the world set up; and not only in the realms of art but in every walk of life we must suffer an ideal, which has always proved acceptable to the national temper, however it debases taste, warps the judgment, and causes even our worthiest traditions to become the prey of all who have not forgotten the honest usages of laughter."

And although our young ladies one and all were much too honest to pretend to understand a word of what this peroration really meant they had wit enough to know it must be fine, because when Joan read it out aloud it sounded beautiful; also they knew it must be true because every word was strongly against Aunt Emma.

There was no name attached to this impassioned piece of newspaper English, strangely enough.

Again and again had Lady Bosket's nieces read that review: They would turn to it for solace when newly come from under the lash of her tongue. When it had coiled round them and left them bleeding, they would turn to it and with a keener zest go over every familiar line once more. It healed them a little to hear the whip crack about her too. Or if their Uncle Charles, the dearest, kindest-hearted uncle in the world, was more depressed, and drank a little more whisky than usual, they would read it to avenge his wrongs. Joan, Roman-hearted Joan, Joan of Arc was the special name they had given her, so hugely was she admired by the other five because of her high and inflexible spirit—Joan made it her boast that she knew every word of it by heart, and at a moment's notice could repeat it all, right from the beginning.

This afternoon they had a painful duty to perform. Whenever Aunt Emma published a new book, it was her custom to carry a copy to Covenden for the improvement of the minds of her nieces. It is true a doubt always ac-

companied the Grecian gift—a doubt whether the pious object she had in view would be fulfilled. "I don't suppose you will read it, and if you do I don't suppose you will understand it," she was wont to say in her lofty manner, "but at least it shall not be urged against me that I have made no effort to rescue your understandings from the peculiar squalor of their environment." The meaning of the word environment they were not very clear about, but they felt sure it was not at all nice, else it would not have been used by Aunt Emma.

With the same solemnity as the gift was made to them, her nieces, without a glance at the latest offspring of their gifted relation's genius, invariably took steps to be rid of it. It had become their custom to burn the offending tome in the conscientious but uncompromising manner that heretics were burnt of old. No victim of the Inquisition, no Smithfield martyr ever received his doom with a more ruthless gusto on the part of his executioners.

That morning Lady Bosket had presented them with the latest volume of her precious imaginings, humbly entitled *Weeds in the Grass*. She did not mean it of course. But did it not savour of a delicate piquancy that the world-famous authoress of *Poses in the Opaque* should choose a name as meek as this for any child of her intellect? The daily journals remarked upon it with an eager unanimity, and chided her tenderly for such a delightfully obvious deception. A footman, a real live one, born and bred to the wig and powder, retained by a morning newspaper with great expense and enterprise, because of his intimate knowledge of the aristocracy, was sure her ladyship must have her tongue in her cheek! The weekly journals, the organs of literary culture and critical opinion, very shrewdly saw a wider-reaching significance in such an elaborate humility. Great critics wrote scholarly and closely reasoned articles to prove that Genius Was No Longer Arrogant. And they based their argument upon the case of the authoress of the immortal *Poses*, a great lady, a daughter of a peer, the wife of another, and the niece, the cousin, and the granddaughter of several.

It was printed on parchment, and bound in white vellum. It was dedicated "To my Husband." Critical

journals remarked upon the essential simplicity of this lady, whose distinguished fate had not divorced her from a sense of the sacred nature of motherhood and wifeliness. She was devoutly domestic before the world. Critical journals remarked on that also, and pointed the moral of it to the more emancipated members of her sisterhood who went about with shrieks and battle-cries, brandishing their pens, and flinging ink. If she, a person of unfaltering ideals and impeccable distinction, was content to be simple and natural, and did not hold the first and highest duties of her sex to scorn, was it too much to ask an alike humility of them ?

On the title-page there was a quotation from Bishop Butler, several from the classic authors in their original Greek and Latin, and one from *Amiel's Journal*. On the next there was an open letter to the authoress from the late Mr. Gladstone, her very dear friend. In the first chapter the late Mr. Matthew Arnold was quoted at length; in the second, the Poet Laureate and the Right Honourable Lord Byron were crowned with bay. Critical journals gathered from a close perusal of her work that romantically afraid lest she should be thought *parvenue*—surely it was of the marrow of romance that one throned in Debrett far above the breath of detraction should suffer these sentimental notions—she traced her literary parentage back as far as Dr. Richard Hooker; although very properly she liked it to be understood that the first place in her esteem was reserved for the band of contributors to the New Testament.

Such was the fair flower of the mind that was called on to undergo the last indignity a book can suffer. No mischievous print, no volume of sedition, however ribald, licentious, or heretical, was committed to the flames of yore by the common hangman with an unction more impressive. In a group around it stood five of the executioners, whilst Joan the sixth suspended the offensive work in a pair of tongs by one of its virgin boards of white vellum. Candour and our respect for the character of the authoress forces us to confess that the tone of the martyr-volume was so blameless that it was fit to be read any Sunday, by any clergyman in the bosom of his family.

But the most spotless virtue never had a pennyworth of weight with fanaticism. That which could not avail La Pucelle and Dame Alice Lisle was powerless to defend even the pure and modest muse of Lady Bosket. One by one, in regular rotation and perfect order, the executioners circled, each in her turn plucking out a leaf and committing it incontinently to the fire; and in the act they pronounced the incantation: "There, Aunt Emma, this is what we are doing with your horrid book!"

CHAPTER VIII

Enter the True Prince in the Guise of a Dustman

A FEW days later our hero was riding to the meet of the Parkshire Hounds about ten o'clock in the morning. He was accompanied by his retinue of daughters, Joan, Harriet, and Margaret, whose privilege it was that day to be mounted in a becoming manner, with Philippa and Jane bringing up the rear, as became their humbler state, on bicycles. The gallant company had come to the porter's lodge that kept the gates of their ancestral residence, when they were accosted by an insignificant-looking young man in a blue melton overcoat.

The first fact pertaining to this young man's appearance that struck their somewhat distressingly acute feminine observation, was that the overcoat was old, and that the velvet collar that had formerly been an ornament to it had now ceased to behave in that capacity. It was frayed and embrowned with decay. He was a pale young man, decidedly under the middle height, with a head inclined to droop, and rather a misfit for his body. It looked several sizes too large for it; and he wore an air of earnest perplexity, as though even as he walked he was grappling with the problem of how to bear about such a very big thing on such an inadequate vehicle. His shoulders too seemed to be preoccupied with the same responsibility. They had a bunched, a rounded look, as though the young man had a pair of corsets beneath his coat that did not fit him. He was wearing a bowler hat that was rather battered, worn to a fictitious polish around the brim, almost green with age in places, and so liberally encased

with dust that a kind of outer shell had been formed upon it. In its relations with the young man's head this article seemed to share the disabilities of his person. It coped no better with that egregious skull. It had the look of a cockle-shell jauntily poised on his thick brown patch, and at the first sight lent him an appearance of a latent sauciness which if you happened to catch it at an appropriate angle was irresistibly diverting in such a serious demeanour.

He wore a low collar; his tie was broad and vague and unimpressive; his boots were distinguished members of the noble order of the "knubbly"; his trousers bagged at the knees, and were turned down demurely, and the only creases of which they could boast were one round each ankle, where on wet days it was their wont to turn up. In a word, the appearance of the young man was ineffectual. There was an almost pathetic lack of distinction about his clothes and the unobtrusive way he wore them which would not have seduced our hero and his attendant Dianas to bestow a glance upon him had he not stopped as they came through the gate, raised his hat with a diffidence the reverse of the fashionable, and ventured to address them.

"Mr. Broke?"

"That is my name," said their father, looking him over keenly.

"My name is Porter. I am engaged to coach one of your daughters. Mrs. Broke wrote to say that this morning at ten o'clock would be a convenient hour for my duties to begin."

"That is so, I believe. My youngest daughter is at home with that object in view."

The cavalcade passed on. The young man saluted them again, but their father did not acknowledge the courtesy.

Poor Delia! Well might she fail to hide the tears that sparkled in her eyes when she watched them ride away. Poor little kid! It was become almost a proverb with them that she was born to be unlucky. All the disagreeable things seemed to fall to her. But of all the untoward events that had ever occurred, all paled into insigni-

ficance before this, the crowning one. To become a *protégé* of Aunt Emma! The humiliation was only equalled by the inconvenience. So this was their aunt's emissary. He coincided in every way with the picture already painted of him in their imaginations. He was just the person you would expect her to send. If looks counted for anything, he was a worthy minion. It was hard enough for her, poor little kid, that she should be compelled to forego the delights of this perfect hunting-day at the dictation of the Ogress, a name that Joan had invented for her, without having to suffer the additional indignity of spending it in such society. Their mother knew what was good for them of course, but it did seem hard on their sister. The reason of it and the justice had to be taken for granted, for they were quite at a loss to evolve them out of their own private code of wisdom and probity. He was a very *terrible* young man!

The subject of these reflections had in the meantime passed on towards the house. Presently he was face to face with the imposing doors of their dwelling. He pulled at the bell. An august old gentleman attended his summons at a majestic leisure. The august old gentleman looked him up and down, from his green hat to his misshapen boots, in a perfectly liberal spirit of criticism. Subtle and indefinite signs seemed to indicate that his appearance hardly recommended itself to the austere custodian of the family dignity.

"Mr. Porter," said the visitor, entering the hall with an air that somehow hardly went with his clothes.

Mr. Porson's manner of conducting Mr. Porter to the drawing-room had an excellent touch of condescension in it, yet it was hardly so pronounced as a moment ago the circumstances seemed to warrant.

During the five minutes in which the visitor was left alone, in this cold and draughty apartment, he picked up a copy of the *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* in the version of Edward Fitzgerald, which was lying on a table, and proceeded to read. He was startled by a creak of skirts. He lifted his eyes to discover that a woman had entered the room, and was looking keenly at him. She was a red-faced, hard-featured, rather countrified-looking woman, who might not have appeared out of place had she been

keeping a stall in Cuttisham market. The instant the young man lifted his eyes and beheld her, her face melted in a dazzling smile.

"Even you, Mr. Porter," she said with an easy promptitude, as though they were very old friends, "in an idle moment can allow yourself to be diverted with these elegant trifles. I confess I shall not be quite so much afraid of you now. I was trembling lest one of your attainments and an unlearned woman like myself would have no common ground on which to meet. You see my sister-in-law has frightened me with your reputation."

The young man returned the smile frankly. Already he was trying to detect a certain note his instincts assured him were lurking in this flattering address. But listen as he might he could not trace it; so cunningly was it hidden that it might not be there after all. The delicate concealment of it was due perhaps to the quality of the voice. The voice of this red-faced, hard-featured, perpetually smiling woman was very beautiful indeed. The first sensation it gave him was that he asked no better than to stand there on that rather threadbare carpet in that decidedly draughty drawing-room, and hear her talk for ever.

"You have come from Cuttisham," she said. "I fear it is a very long journey. But probably you have a bicycle, or you ride?"

"I prefer to walk," said the young man. "It is not more than four miles."

"That is eight, here and home again. It seems a very long walk."

"I try to get exercise. A man of sedentary occupation takes it if he's wise."

"Without a doubt you are right, but I must prevail upon you to have some little refreshment after such exertion. A biscuit and a whisky and soda? A glass of sherry and a piece of cake?"

The young man was proof against these alluring things; but when he was conducted, presently, by Mrs. Broke to the library to make the acquaintance of his pupil, he was in danger of becoming her friend for life. The quarter of an hour he had spent with this singularly amiable woman was a memorable experience. She was so simple, so

melodious, so very solicitous for one's welfare, although she was hardly conscious of one's existence and had never set eyes on one before! It was as though this gracious matron, with her dazzling smile and her beautiful voice, was making love to one all the time.

There was a brave fire on the wide hearth of the library, and a small brown, rather plaintive little figure was seated at a table before it. A sad little figure. There were several ominous blots drying on a page of Euclid's *Second Book*, which was open in front of her. Haloes of faint red shone round her eyes in the glow of the firelight. When the door opened, and her mother appeared with a man behind her, at whom Delia hardly dared to look, she flushed and rose timidly.

"This is the child, Mr. Porter," said her mother in that tone of ultra-graciousness that could always leave a weal upon them when it chose. "But let me confess that I do not envy you your task—a very labour of Hercules!" Her laughter rippled like a flute. "The name of Broke is a synonym for a splendid intellectual nullity. In all the hundreds of years it has been borne about by the thousands of human entities it has adorned, I defy you to find one wearer of it who has been distinguished for learning, for wit, for intellectual fineness, or subtlety of any sort. They have all been on the same dead level; the maximum of animal vigour, and the minimum of divine understanding. One cannot claim that the present generation is an exception to the universal rule. The sun of its knowledge is confined to dogs and horses; it makes its friendships and holds its intercourse with the beasts of the field. It has a healthy contempt for culture in any form, a fine intolerance of the aesthetic, and, as I am afraid you will discover, an inordinate distrust of any who would presume to tamper with this Arcadian simplicity. I hope, Mr. Porter, I have not daunted you; but if you fail, I do not want you to blame yourself."

This speech of introduction, taken on its naked merits, phrase by phrase, was decidedly not kind. But the suave mellow accents in which it was embodied made it impossible to dwell upon that aspect of it. It was so pointed that it must have stung and bitten had not the delicate use of the voice

conveyed the latent sense of caress, like the fur about the claw of the tiger. All the same the flush in the face of the little creature deepened slowly during her mother's speech.

The young man bowed to his pupil when at last the chance was allowed him to do so. Delia returned the bow with a feeling of bewilderment. Almost in the act, the thought flashed through her that he was the ugliest and oddest man she had ever seen.

When presently her mother withdrew, poor Delia made no effort to dissemble her sense of persecution.

" I have made up my mind to hate you, Mr. Porter," she said with a deliberation, under which was her timidity.

" Honesty ! " said the young man, with half a smile.

In his eyes she was only a little chit of a thing with a russet coloured face nearly as plain and countrified as her mother's. But it had much greater naturalness. It had none of those ingratiating tricks that played so skilfully upon the judgment. This was a pathetically plain little face which, apart from a slight shyness induced by the circumstances and her sex, in itself rather pretty because so infinitely well bred, had an air of candour, of unfearing innocence that was appealing. But there was a memorable nose stuck in the middle. It fascinated the young man ; never had he seen an organ so remarkable on the face of a woman. It might have made him laugh if somehow, out of proportion as it was, it did not seem after all, in an absurd whimsical manner, to be appropriate to her quaintness, and to hold quite rightly and properly its niche in nature. At a second glance it seemed as much a part of her countenance as was the smile of Mrs. Broke a part of hers. Insensibly it lured his picturesque fancy to revert to the Crusaders and the days of Chivalry, so that when he looked at it again, the glamour of a poetic age was shining on it. All the same it was a little odd, a little unexpected on a young girl.

He liked the way in which she made her uncompromising statement. It was a curious, imperious little way, which yet seemed to be hers quite prettily and properly for all her shyness ; it was almost something you might associate with a small princess or a fairy.

"Alas ! you have made up your mind to hate me," he said. " Ruthless feminine justice, but very proper. I am to be punished, not that I am the real cause of your not going

gaily a-hunting with your father and sisters this delightful morning, but as the servile minion of Destiny—inexorable Destiny, that pays me to keep you in prison at the rate of two shillings and sixpence an hour."

The young man's laugh was by no means so unpleasant as you would expect, but the little creature met it with resolute eyes.

"I don't think I blame you," she said with a pretty little air of rectitude.

"You hate me, which is harder to bear."

Again she refused to relax to his laugh, although it did not jar upon her at all. In fact it was rather nice to hear him laugh.

"I cannot help hating you," she said.

"Well, Miss Broke, I respect your candour."

"It is horrid of me, but I cannot help speaking as—as I feel."

"Alas!" he said, "that I have not the spirit to defend myself. Do you know that when I met your sisters at the gate laughing and chattering at the top of their voices, I felt that I should not be forgiven? My fancy formed a picture of you as a sort of captive fairy princess immured in a moated grange, with myself, my wicked and unworthy self, in the part of the ruthless ogre who persecutes her; or again, and a little more prosaically, as Cinderella, with myself as the ugly and malevolent sister who kept her from the ball. Believe me, I deplore my ignoble *rôle*. In fact if you relent, you will hardly be a true princess."

"I will certainly not relent."

The decision seemed to please him.

"Do you think my humility makes you more resolute?"

"I—I do not think it could!"

Delia clutched her book of Euclid, and tried to squeeze the sudden tears back into her eyes. A fat one, however, insisted on pushing itself forward on to her apple-coloured cheek.

"Alas, poor princess!"

The young man's sigh was as whimsical as his face.

"I am not a princess. I hope you will not call me princess."

"Alas, poor Cinderella!"

" My name is not Cinderella, if you don't mind."

" Cinderella is your real name, I am sure, although, quite ignorantly and mistakenly, they call you Miss Delia. My own is Merlin, although somewhat perversely I sign my letters in the name of Alfred."

" I—I think you laugh at me. Please do not."

" On the contrary, I am trying to be sympathetic."

" Please do not—please do not be sympathetic."

" I exceed my duties ? "

" Indeed, yes."

" Then what, pray, is to become of my high mission ? Without perfect intercourse I am afraid this doleful clerk will never lead his charge to the Mecca of the faithful fair, the portals of Newnham College."

" I am sure, Mr. Porter, that if my aunt should find you to have sympathy for me in any way, you will not be allowed to see me again."

" You are solicitous for my two and sixpence an hour ? "

" Yes, I am," said Delia promptly.

The young man laughed. He opened a pair of very large and deep-set eyes at her, and regarded the stain drying on the russet surface of the cheek with a grave amusement. Delia suddenly felt herself to be blushing horribly. In about the same instant she felt they were going to be friends. She had already been a little astonished to find herself talking to him so easily. Ever since her aunt had conceived the fatal resolve she had been sure she would be committed to the tender mercies of some hopelessly dull, not to say vulgar young pedant. Her sisters had declared it must be so with dreary unanimity; but mother had hinted at it; Aunt Emma herself on the terrible occasion had even drawn the portrait of that kind of person. Her horrid precautions she was sure must inevitably take that form. If only to " safeguard her "—a phrase she could only understand faintly, and none of the others knew precisely what Aunt Emma intended to convey by it either—she was sure she would be crushed flat under a very Juggernaut of learning. But this young man did not seem formidable at all. To be sure he was not very prepossessing to look at. The first glimpse indeed that she had had of him had almost caused her to shiver; he seemed such an odd mis-

shapen clumsy, ugly creature. However, now she had got more used to the sight of him he had lost something of this look of the grotesque. And when he talked he was almost nice.

Still the only thing you might say of him positively was that he had a clean collar. To be quite fair to Aunt Emma, her emissary had clean finger-nails also; probably her aunt intended that his should do honour to hers. She didn't know what to make of his face. Somehow it was an odd, queer kind of face, quite the frontispiece you would expect to such an odd, queer kind of head. The more she looked at it the more it puzzled her. And when he opened his eyes at her and gave her that whimsical grave smile she felt nonplussed utterly. His face was no longer ugly when he smiled, yet even then it was not retrieved of that suggestion of the sombre, which was perhaps, when all was said, the predominant factor in it. His face was very pale and worn and thin; there were lines on the forehead; and the prominence of the cheek-bones and the attenuation of the flesh that covered them gave a kind of mountain-and-valley effect to the upper part of his countenance in conjunction with the lower. The abrupt walls of his lean jaws curved into the shape of a hatchet. His eyes were large and melancholy, of a grey brooding colour, set very deep, and with a rather disconcerting but not unpleasant habit, as she had already discovered, of coming wide open at you suddenly. When they did this their dimension was a little astonishing. His forehead came forth boldly, an uncompromising dome, his brows were strongly marked, and when he was silent the thin curves of his lips sealed his mouth so tightly that it seeemed hard to know how ever they were going to spring apart. His natural expression you could not very well describe, yet it needed but a little to become morose and even slightly frightening. That was singular because his voice was so different. It was a low, mild, beguiling voice, not in the least harsh or displeasing, as you would think it must be. It had already done something to reconcile her to her hard lot that she could actually sit and listen to it without the smallest sensation of antagonism.

"Would you say that a book was worse than a poacher?"

"There are books that I love," said Delia, with a measure of hesitation and a bright colour.

"But not in the way you love hunting?"

"Yes, the books I mean. I love them quite as much, or—or more."

"That is excellent; I am glad."

"Why are you glad, Mr. Porter?"

"I think I may hope. You see, if you had no love for books you would find my presence intolerable."

"Yes, I should."

The young man could not repress another smile at the deliberate syllables of her candour. It was only a furtive one, but in an instant crimson flowed across her face.

"I beg your pardon; I have been rude."

"'*La franchise provoquant la franchise.*' I assail you with Stendhal to show that I am hurt."

"Oh, I am sure I beg your pardon."

"Your sensitiveness makes me more hopeful than ever."

"I will try to deserve your kindness," said Delia with a graciousness born of his own demeanour. He was not consciously the courtier, but his tones were conciliatory, and as a rule her sex are not slow to grant them recognition.

"You do not need to assure me of that."

"I will try to be worthy of your patience. But please do not expect too much of me; you do not know how stupid I am at learning things."

"Tell me what are these books you love."

She showed no eagerness to answer the question. Indecision took her, and it made her dumb when he looked at her in the particular way she had already found so disconcerting.

"There is nothing to withhold," he said persuasively.

"They are not at all what I ought to read, I know," she said at last with an effort. "They are poetry and novels, I am afraid."

"Aha! why is the illicit ever so delectable? You owe allegiance to the reigning monarchs, I presume; Miss Jones, Mrs. Smith, and Mr. Alfred So-and-So?"

"I have only one favourite among the writers of the present day," said Delia.

The animation of her companion's manner and the keen

way in which he put his questions were infectious. There is no freemasonry like the passion for books, unless it be that of love. The arcana of the order are magically communicated. There was an eagerness in the young man's eyes when he spoke about books that stripped him, as far as Delia was concerned, of at least half the terrifying reports of his scholarship. Even his strange face lost a part of its grimness.

"I must have the name of the author."

"Meredith," said Delia, nervously.

"Alas! the incorrigible old man. I trust you do not respect him the most because you can understand him the least."

"I can understand all the parts I want to understand, I think."

"And skip those that you can't?"

"I am not in the habit of skipping."

"Of course, of course! The suggestion was unworthy. But tell me, do you prefer his poetry or his novels?"

"There are heaps and heaps of poetry I love more than his; but when I read his novels my pleasure almost frightens me."

"Hyperbole."

"I am sure, Mr. Porter, you know what I mean. I can see it in your face."

"Well, well! Which of his heroines would you choose to be? Clara Middleton? If I were a woman, I would choose to be her, just as being a man I want to be her hero."

"If I could be the heroine out of a story, I think I would choose to be Diana Vernon."

"Yes, I daresay she was rather better to hounds, but I doubt whether she could run like Clara. And I am sure her complexion was not so fine, although there was more of it possibly; and Clara's wit was more polished, and I believe she was just a lee-tle bit more the lady. Not that these are qualities to count in a lady in a tale, or in real life perhaps, in the incredibly fair creature with whom we chance to fall in love. But it sticks in my mind that Clara was slightly the more beautiful."

"But I am sure, Mr. Porter, that Diana had the grander character. She always puts me in mind of my sister

Joan. She has a grand character. You will be sure to meet her, and I hope you will, for I am sure you are just two people who would like one another. I think my sister will impress you."

"I gather that the great Sir Walter is another of your friends?"

"I am afraid I worship him."

"And the poets?"

"Keats is my favourite of them all."

"And then?"

"And then there is the *Faerie Queene*."

"And then?"

"And then there is Shakespeare, and those lovely short pieces in Milton, and Adonais, and some little pieces of Dryden, and some of the translations I have read of Homer: Chapman I love best because he rolls out so grandly; and then there's Swinburne and Rossetti, and Tennyson, and some of those beautiful dusty old poets in the brown volumes on the shelves there right at the top—Herrick, and Marlowe, and Webster, and Fletcher, and Drummond of Hawthornden. Oh! and I love Mr. Henley, and Michael Drayton."

"What about Chaucer?"

"I think I love Chaucer best of all."

"And to return to the poor prose-men?"

"I think poor dear old Don Quixote is the one I worship most. He sometimes makes me think of my father."

"Your father did not appear to be mounted on Rozinante when we met this morning. There was rather a Bertrand du Guesclin look about him. But it is my duty to insist that you worship *Robinson Crusoe*."

"I do indeed, and *Treasure Island* too, and the *Three Musketeers*."

"And *Pilgrim's Progress* and one Sir Thomas Mallory?"

"Oh, yes, and Ruskin and Charles Lamb; and I believe the wicked *Tom Jones* if I dare, only Aunt Emma caught me reading him one day, and she was so shocked that she had him burnt—four volumes of him, and if took me weeks and weeks to live down the disgrace."

"That is an anecdote that will have to be retold in the biography of the author of *Poses in the Opaque*."

CHAPTER IX

Startling Development of the Heroine

TUTOR and pupil caught themselves smiling at the mention of the magic name.

"Is it my duty to admire *her?*" said Delia gravely.

"Your critical judgment fits you to answer the question for yourself."

"I am so relieved," said Delia.

Her sigh of satisfaction was fetched so deep that he turned his laugh upon the little lady.

"Splendid!" he said. "I recognize the spirit of No-compromise—the spirit that enabled those ancestors of yours to bleed for their opinions."

"I don't know about that," said Delia; "I suppose it is all very wrong and very wicked, but that is how I feel. My sisters are the same. If people are our friends, we love them; but if they are not our friends, I—I am afraid——!"

Something flashed so vividly out of the child's eyes, that his attention was called for the first time to their quality. Rather extraordinary eyes he thought they were; not arresting perhaps to a cursory look, but once you had seen them you required to see them again. Blue was their colour: blue as ocean and sky; blue demanding a Meredithian simile if you chanced to catch them in a moment when you might surprise what slept beneath the veil that kept their mysteries. The flash had revealed her. Looking through it at her, with the piercing gaze of the artist and the connoisseur he saw she was an exquisite little creature in her way. Although even as he was travelling to this fact he paid to himself the compliment that it was

not a perfunctory vision that so interpreted her. The requisite amount of delicate alertness was demanded to evolve so rare a kernel out of a shell.

"You love poetry, Mr. Porter. I know you do!"

"How do you know?"

"It is in your voice and your eyes when you speak about it. It is delicious to be able to talk of it just as one feels. That is if I may; you will allow me, will you not?"

"Why not? I would rather talk of poetry to the right person than do anything else in the world."

"Alas! the right person."

"You must allow me to choose her."

Delia felt herself flushing nervously under the whimsical assurance of his eyes. She feared him already; and yet in the most singular way he was easier to talk to than any one she had ever known. With her father, her sisters, her Uncle Charles, all of whom in a sense were her boon companions, and of whom she was no more afraid than they were of her, she had never found herself conversing so swiftly, so pleasantly, never with so little difficulty in expressing her thoughts, and with so many thoughts surging to be expressed. She was really far more afraid, absurd as such a thing might seem, of this new strange friend of hers than she was of her mother and her Aunt Emma. He gave her, even when he appeared to try to minimize it, a far keener sense of her own littleness than did they, although so often it had seemed to her that they strove might and main to inflict her with that effect. But this inscrutable man was quite apart in her experience. A baffling, a fascinating, an elusive something lurked behind that beguiling voice. Ten men's natures merged in one might have employed his laugh to express their single complex entity. Again, his simplicity was very baffling too. She actually found him easier to talk to than Jane, or Harriet, or Margaret; he seemed such a wonderfully human being; yet all the time she conversed with him there was a chance that he might be some inordinately cunning thing who was only pretending to be human after all. He might be amusing himself by deceiving her. There was just a fear that it might be a case of little Red Riding Hood. He might

be a wolf or a dragon who of a sudden would throw off his cloak of a lover of poetry, put out a paw and gobble her up. Because whatever pains he was at to show her he was as perfectly elementary as she was herself, she was sure he was nothing of the kind. In mental stature he was superhuman, he was a giant, and it was not a bit of good his trying to disguise the fact. There was nothing of the Jane or Harriet quality about this slightly weird simplicity of his.

"I know I shall bore you very much, Mr. Porter," she said eagerly but fearfully, "but you do not know how I long to talk to you. You see all my sisters despise books; and even my mother is not a lover of poetry."

"That is surprising!" The young man permitted himself an arch smile.

"She says a fondness for poetry ought to be prescribed for like a disease."

"She insists on the scientific and the useful?"

"Not altogether. She is, oh, so dreadfully clever."

"Ah, my prophetic soul! Suppose we say her idea of literature is something that will get examination marks or put meat in the pot or coals on the fire? Well, it happens that the terms of my mission render it necessary that I shall regard it in that light myself, at the rate of two shillings and sixpence an hour."

"Yes, but as we know what it is we shall only be playing a game, shall we not? When we study philosophy we can pretend it's Keats. And we shall be able to make believe when we are toiling with Aristotle and Plato that they are dear Sir Walter Scott."

"So we shall!"

"You are going to give me the keys to those great things I cannot read. You will unlock the doors that hold their meaning that I may understand the wonderful prose which is so grand and so bewildering, the poetry that haunts you all night and every night like the voices in the trees."

The child bent forward eagerly with her hands locked round her little knees, and as she did so the tears sprang suddenly into her eyes.

"Hullo! a spark of the sacred flame!"

"Please you will not laugh at me!"

"It would be a sacrilege. It is the stuff of which once upon a time this poetry was made. In the day of the common danger, or the common wrong it was exaltations such as these that emitted the native woodnotes wild of which we of the tepid, ultra-civilized, over-secure twentieth century are the inheritors. Has your race ever had a poet, Miss Broke? I cannot recall one."

"There is a Lady Margaret Broke, who composed a Book of Hours in the reign of Edward the Third. I do not think you will call it very fine poetry."

"May I ask if Miss Delia Broke has made the attempt to remove this stigma of poetical sterility from her family?"

"No—yes—that is, at least!"

Her friend regarded the tokens of her too vivid embarrassment with a pretence of gravity. Even as she struggled with her tormenting blushes she felt how impossible it was to keep a secret from those unsparing eyes. Her fear of him was suddenly reasserted. But she was powerless to confess her guilt even while her silence published it.

"Since when have you been a poet?"

Never before had she made the confession; and with that morbid dread of criticism that may possess the most sensitive of her kind she had felt it would be impossible to reveal her secret. But the murder was out now; she stood convicted before this inexorable judge, who seemed to have the power to pierce through every fibre that composed her.

"Let me see your poetry."

"No—no, I cannot!" said Delia, a little wildly "It—it is not meant to be seen."

"Are you quite sure about that?"

"I am quite sure!"

"Reflect a little. Think out exactly how you feel about it. I know a little myself of the inmost feelings of authors."

"I am quite sure."

"Reflect a little longer. The inmost feelings of authors are woefully complex."

"Indeed I am quite sure my wretched writings were never intended for you to read."

"Reflect a minute longer. The whole truth is worth a struggle."

"They would make you despise me dreadfully."

"In your heart you are not so sure."

"Oh, how can you know that!"

"I know it only too well. I too am cursed with the same itch. And we are all alike, we authors. Nature is careful of the type. We, you and I, Miss Delia Broke and Mr. Alfred Porter, write to be read as much as ever Virgil and Milton did."

Delia began to grow irresolute. There was something very uncompromising under his laugh.

"Suppose you fetch them for me to see?" His inflection of persuasiveness somehow left no margin for refusal.

"Oh, I could not, indeed I could not!" cried poor Delia.

"A poet must be prepared to face his responsibilities. These things of ours are wrought for the embellishment of truth, the embodiment of beauty. They can achieve neither the one nor the other if they are immured. We poets must purchase the courage of our endeavours, and learn to endure the carpings of fools, and the censure of those wiser and more righteous than ourselves."

"But I am not a poet; indeed I do not pretend to be a poet," said Delia, taking fright at his pretence of austerity.

"Nothing can save you from the charge. You have committed your thoughts to paper in the choicest form at your command. I hope you do not wish a fellow-craftsman to understand that you have not wrought the best that is in you."

"I was very much in earnest when I wrote them. But I feel how poor they must be."

"You would hardly have preserved them had you felt that."

"Indeed I do feel it; I do indeed!"

"You think like that towards them in your moments of reaction, but in those of your impulse you have a sharp sense of their beatitude. They stand out then in the radiant colours in which you wrought them originally,

and even seem worthy of the mood in which they were conceived."

Delia was beginning to learn already how impotent she was before him. She had denied the existence of her writings when he had surprised the secret in her; he had made her confess that they were composed for a public, had she only had the courage to commit them to it; and now he was about to compel her to yield them to the light when her reticence shuddered at the act. It was as though a new force had caught her. There was not a loophole by which he allowed her to escape the consequences of her deeds. The thoughts she had ventured to embody were summoned to pay a toll for their existence. His pertinacity caused her to see a kind of justice in it, and presently with many aches and misgivings she rose to do his will.

While Delia went to procure these first-fruits of her young imagination, her tutor turned his attention to the library shelves. There were few new books, but some delightful old ones. It was a collection that owed little to the present generation of its owners, but was rather an accretion of centuries. His eyes glowed at a sight so delectable. When Delia returned, bearing her treasures like babes in her arms before her, he was preoccupied with a sense of pleasures to come. He saw the promise of many Arcadian hours.

Delia's writings were well calculated to exhibit the scope and calibre of her mind. They comprised poems, plays, essays, hymns, short stories, and fragments of several novels. They were carefully rolled into some twenty little tubes of white paper, sedulously clean, and tied with blue ribbon. They represented the activities of a prolific pen and a lively imagination since the age of twelve. With Mr. Porter's aid they were laid reverently side by side upon the table before the fire.

"Do your worst, Mr. Critic," she said, outwardly calm, but with a beating heart. "They are arranged like the works of Shakespeare, in the order of time. The date of their birth is written outside. Please do not look at the early ones. They will make you laugh."

The child affected a note of gaiety that hardly rang

true. The tumult within was very high. With a short little laugh and a rather high colour, she selected the first roll to pass in judgment before her critic. Not improperly it was a poem on a tragic theme. It was inspired by the death of Cutlass, a gallant but too intrepid hound, who took a somewhat informal departure from this life, because he chose to cross the railway when hounds were in full cry at the moment the express from London had chosen to cross it also.

The critic glanced at it with an immobility of countenance that could not be read, rolled it up and replaced it without a word of comment. He then turned his attention to prose and the drama. These did not elicit a word from him either. He then took up an essay; it was called "An Appreciation of Lord Tennyson." This also he read in a silence as complete as that in which he had read the others.

Delia watched every phase of his impassiveness while she tried not to do so. She strove very hard to attain that stoical indifference which she was sure her sister Joan would have been able to exhibit in these circumstances. But she felt ruefully that nature had not fashioned her on a principle so heroic. Her fibres were too pliant, too flaccid; her self-command almost failed her. The silence of the critic was a relief in a sense, but also it was bitterly disappointing.

"Are they—are they quite hopeless?" she ventured to ask at last, faintly.

"Suppose we burn them."

She recoiled, aghast. It was like a hit in the face. A course so extreme had never entered her mind. The criticism she dreaded she had been steeling her heart to bear; but total annihilation struck too fiercely at the roots of sentiment. The twenty little rolls were dear and faithful friends who had nourished her lonely spirit secretly when all the world had been unkind.

"N—no, I could not burn them," she said in a thin little voice.

Her tone caused the critic to look at her keenly. "It may seem a little drastic," he said, "but that is the only way for the artist."

"I—I do not think of myself as an artist at all."

"I pay you the compliment of looking at you in that light."

"But I am sure I would prefer not to be an artist and be allowed to keep my treasures, than be an artist and have them cruelly destroyed."

"Think," said the critic, enfolding her with a melancholy smile, "achievement means blood and tears and the fire."

"Oh, I am sure I could never consent to have them burned. My mother found them once in their hiding-place and said she would burn them, and I passed a dreadful week in consequence. My sister Joan might be able to bear it if they were hers; yes, she would, for her courage is so great; but I am a wretched coward."

"You must have courage too," said the young man with the pertinacity that had defeated her before. "The title of artist is not lightly to be renounced. The laurels are a crown of thorns; but the blood and tears they draw out of us are replaced by certain ecstasies of the spirit. Courage, courage, always courage!"

His face was quite bewildering in its complexity.

"You almost frighten me," said Delia, quailing. "I—I—I feel so mean."

"Try not to judge yourself harshly."

"But ought not one to be honest in one's judgment of oneself?"

"Ah, but what of the natures whose owners have not the power to judge? Perhaps this nature of yours may prove stronger than you know."

The child shivered.

"I am sure I could not, I am sure I could not!" she cried, training a sidelong look upon her precious possessions. "Besides, Mr. Porter, was not Shakespeare an artist? yet he never blotted a line."

"I would he had blotted a thousand. Even genius must not fear the sword and the fire."

"Oh, how hard, how very hard!"

"Yes, but Art is the most arduous thing in the world. The artist must not know the meaning of fear. He has to labour early and late with sinews of steel and an in-

flexible courage in his heart to fight the two-fold battle of truth and beauty against every form of error. There must be no vacillation, no hanging back on the part of those who enter that service. The wounds are many and grievous, the toils severe, the pleasures vague, the rewards transitory and too often a mockery, but the humblest foot-soldier in its ranks has no time to spare to thoughts like these. He suffers great penalties and renounces the flesh simply to say, This is Me, This is my Soul."

Delia regarded her tutor with a grave bewilderment. He had spoken with something of the fanaticism of the high priest, yet there was a reserve of control over all he said. There was neither morbid passion in his voice nor hectic madness in his face. In her youthful chivalry she recognized that it was the strong calling on the weak to gird itself in resolve. Her fear of him, at first an instinct, was mounting to a pitch that made her shrink.

"You mean we must be true to ourselves," she said, with a startled look.

"Yes, let us do the best that is in us. Let it be said that we wrought as good as we knew. What man or woman of us all can seek more?"

"You make me feel how great your ideals are."

"And yours?"

"I do try to have my Ideal."

"Well, if you can, give me an outline of its nature."

"I should like to have a splendid character like my sister Joan."

"That is an answer for which I was prepared. Now I want you to take up the best of these performances of yours and read it again. When you have read it, I shall ask you to answer a few questions about it."

Obediently Delia took up her most recent performance, "A Ballad in Imitation of Master Francis Villon."

"Now," said he, when she had read it, "do you think if you wrote it again you could make it better?"

"No, not myself personally. It seems much nearer what I meant than anything I have tried to do before. Of course a real poet would be ashamed of it, but I do not feel I could make it better myself."

"You are convinced?"

"Yes, I think I am," said Delia nervously.

"Well, now," said the young man in a peculiarly kind voice, "I learn from the manner of your ballad that you did not go to the real Villon, but to Dante Gabriel Rossetti. May I ask why?"

"I cannot read Villon as well as I can Rossetti."

"Yes, the mediaeval French has to be grappled with. But now I ask you, do you think you could improve your ballad if you found the original to be as clear as the translation of Rossetti?"

Delia did not answer until she had thought the matter out.

"Perhaps I could just a little in some ways," she confessed reluctantly.

"But the old French is very hard to get on with?"

"Yes, I—I am afraid it is."

"Well, now, I ask you what would your sister Joan do in such circumstances?"

"She would not have written it," said Delia, quickly. "Her tastes are not at all in the direction of poetry."

"Ha! there must be no scope for feminine inconsequence," he said, laughing at her eagerness. "You are to assume that you yourself are your sister Joan. Now tell me the course you would be likely to adopt, according to your conception of her character."

"Perhaps I might learn to read old French," said the child, blushing vividly. She saw suddenly, with a tinge of shame, where the ambush lay.

"And afterwards do you not think you might remodel your ballad by the light of your fuller knowledge? And do you not feel that your imitation would be more faithful?"

Delia replied by placing her ballad into the fire.

"And now the others. If you apply the same standard to them, they cannot hope to fare better."

For a moment she stood in the throes of her irresolution: The conflict soon passed, however. Now the first step was taken she was too thorough-going to be content with half measures. One by one stoically she began to commit her cherished manuscripts to the fire. To be sure it was an act of Spartan resolution; but she held her mouth tight, and kept the tears out of her eyes somehow, and tried to

fix her mind firmly on her sister Joan. Nor did she gather consolation from the attitude of him who was the instigator of this inhuman hardihood. He wasted no sympathy upon the signal deed, but superintended its performance almost as a matter of course. However, when he took two rolls in his hands with the object of committing them personally to perdition, it was a straw too much.

"Put them down, please," she said fiercely. "I cannot have you touch them; I cannot have anybody touch them but myself. They are mine: I made them, and I will make an end of them. I must burn them myself, please."

Tears were very imminent. It is not easy, even for your truly Spartan character, consciously to perform a deed of the first grade of heroism and not have it recognized as such by public opinion.

"You must not think I underrate your heroism. I am not sure that I could have done it myself."

"You—you do not know how dear they are to me," said poor Delia.

"I might not have asked you to destroy them had that been the case. I, too, know what the fire is, and must keep acquainted with it for full many a long and weary year."

"I feel cruel; I feel wicked!" wailed poor Delia. "I do not know why I am destroying them; I am sure I did not mean to."

"Nay, do not look on them as dead. They are the seeds that one day will raise the flower. Who can tell what shall spring from these balls of white fluff. One wonders how much Milton burnt when he was young. Now suppose you do not put pen to paper again for a whole year in the way of composition. You shall read what you choose in the meantime, for your taste is too pure to lead you astray. You have no voice at present, it would be astonishing if you had; but give yourself up to those who have spoken greatly to the ages, and perhaps in the course of time you may be numbered among them. What thoughts they induce do not trouble to write down, but let them lie fallow. And I think we youthful seekers after Truth—yes, since you have shown yourself capable of this degree of

devotion to a principle, as a fellow cadet of our service I presume to offer you half of my badge—I think we ought, in the first place, to aim at that sovereign humility which nature imposes upon all before they are allowed to see her face.'

The young man concluded his exordium with a strange light shining in his face. But poor Delia continued her painful task, heeding not the prophet. By now, in the effort to arrest them, tears had come at last into her eyes. And there they remained in the most persistent and ridiculous fashion until all the little white rolls tied with blue ribbon had been committed tenderly, unrelentingly to the flames.

CHAPTER X

Tact: with Sidelights on the Sovereign Quality

DELIA was on her knees pressing the last of these sacred packets between the bars, with tears still glistening in her eyes, at the moment Mrs. Broke chose to enter the library.

"Deep in the mysteries of ipsilon and upsilon I do not doubt," said the fluent lady.

However, the attitude in which her daughter was discovered gave pause even to her indomitable readiness.

"Oh, mother!" cried Delia, "I am burning my manuscripts." Her words were accompanied by an audible evidence of grief.

"Do you mean those absurd things I once found in your room?"

Mrs. Broke gave a smile to the tutor.

"A most remarkable morning's work," she said. "I must make you my compliments, Mr. Porter, upon your firmness of character, I must indeed. How you have contrived it I do not know, but I am sure I personally am very grateful. So they are actually destroyed! And may I venture to hope that the folly is forsworn?"

"For a year at least," said the young man.

"Excellent. I see your tact. You do not wish to provoke a fresh outburst by too harsh a prohibition. She is to be cured by degrees. Again, Mr. Porter, I must congratulate you upon such a beginning. I hope you will stay to lunch."

The young man having signified his willingness, Mrs.

Broke led the way to the dining room. The repast was of a singularly frugal nature; but the conversation of the hostess was very gracious, charming, and incessant. Delia, on the other hand, was kept within the limits of a silence that became a small child out of the schoolroom. The conversation, or, more properly, the monologue, for at first the young man's share of it was extremely slight, hovered about the topic of literature. He was entertained by the melodious chatter of this agile woman. The attitude she took was deferential: it repeatedly canvassed his opinion and insisted on her own humility. Still, her humility hardly amounted to awe. For not only was she very pat with opinions of her own, but also she seemed to be acquainted with a little of everything that had been embalmed between two covers, and that little generally coincided with the verdict of the world.

"You are an earnest admirer of Lady Bosket of course?"

"On the contrary, I cannot count myself as one of the elect."

"I beg your pardon."

"On the contrary, I cannot count myself as one of the elect."

The young man repeated his answer without the faintest display of trepidation. His amused coolness, and his complete freedom from apologetic vacillation, took the fluent lady aback. It was so unlooked for. Yet, after all, such a frankness had its piquancy.

"Surely you admire her 'Poses'?"

"I confess they amuse me a little."

"May I confess that on my own part this is the first time I have heard them accused of being amusing."

"I gather that you did not find them so."

The redoubtable woman acknowledged a certain deftness in the touch by asking the young man to pass the claret.

"But surely," she urged while he helped her to it, "you are not insensible to the delicate tracery of her style, the depth of her culture, the width of her outlook?"

"Wholly," said the young man.

"Can it be a blind intolerance? You have reasons of course?"

"I hope I have not developed the fatal habit of making up my mind without them."

"How I long to have the privilege of hearing what they are!"

"I fear you may not find them entertaining. I fear they might seem technical."

"Caviare to the general in other words. Alas, Mr. Porter, that our sex should always be handicapped out of the game. I am a mere woman without pretensions to culture in any form, but if you wish to pay me the most delicate compliment in your power, you will afford me the chance to forget that I am so limited. And, if I may say it, to neglect an opportunity of complimenting a woman on the score of her intellect is a little inhumane. Flattery is very precious in our eyes."

The young man was alert enough to see that he was in imminent danger of crossing swords. But his was a nature that could not shirk a contest. Delia, on the other side of the table, trembled for him. She had a wholesome dread of her mother's powers purchased by many a cutting stroke. Had she been able to save her friend from his danger she would have done so, but tied by her subordinate position she knew not how. Suddenly, however, her desire grew uncontrollable. She must save him at any cost. She bent across the table full under the astonished eyes of her mother, and said, "Please, please do not argue the point! You and my mother do not—do not see things with the same eyes."

Immediately he understood the chivalrous solicitude for himself that had nerved her to this audacity. While, however, he was smiling his gratitude to the little lady, her mother had turned her cold with a smile of her own.

"I beg, Mr. Porter, that you will not humiliate me by withholding your criticism of Lady Bosket. I beg you to overlook my disabilities. I can assure you such a concession will be remembered with ineffable gratitude. And if one who has moved in the world might dare to dispense her wisdom, believe me a man succeeds in proportion to the compliments he pays to women. I never see a field marshal or a cabinet minister but I think, 'Ah, my dear

friend, what adorable compliments you must have paid us!' "

"Lady Bosket and her school," said the young man with an air of deprecation as became one striving to forget the maxim, 'Language was given us to conceal our thoughts,' "are trying to set up a rule of thumb, to which all writing is expected to conform. As in the day of Pope it was the heroic couplet of five feet, so in ours no less is demanded of a writer by Lady Bosket and her school than that he shall have the conscience of a nonconformist. The ideal Lady Bosket has before her is to be respectable in the Victorian sense. She has a mission; she is the guardian of the public decency. You may write like an angel, but says she, beware of your moral tone."

"Surely that is a precept that can never lose its significance."

"In art it has no significance. Art is non-moral."

"Is not that a little cryptic? Surely art overflows with moral teaching?"

"Only inasmuch that it is human endeavour in its highest and most disinterested form. But your true craftsman does not preoccupy himself with shaking his fist in the faces of the wicked; neither does he preoccupy himself with his own integrity. He does not weave his visions and his meditations into patterns that dazzle us into a blindness of dogma. He has no desire to become a shibboleth of the meeting house or the parish council. He is neither better nor worse than ourselves; he is one of us; he is our brother. He holds the mirror up to nature for no conscious advancement of our immortal souls, except in so far as the reflection in it of truth and beauty may react upon them. He paints his Madonna, or carves his Mercury, or writes his epic with fasting and with prayer, but if you are to look for the moral teaching in these works do not seek it in the severity of their line, but in the austerity of the life of him who wrought them."

"I can say with the deepest conviction that the life of Lady Bosket will bear inspection. It is one of continued saintliness."

"One fears the loveliness of her private character is powerless to redeem the unseemliness of her works."

"I beg your pardon."

"The paradox is inevitable. Lady Bosket, in her *rôle* of self-elected guardian of the public morals, is an offence to the sanctity of the art she pretends to serve. Bad art is the only form of immorality known to aestheticism. Lady Bosket is our old friend Mrs. Grundy, in an *édition de luxe*, carefully revised and brought up to date, with an appendix of the latest laws of literary decorum and deportment."

"You will admit, I hope, that there should be at least some standard of good form?"

"I cannot admit an arbitrary one. It ought not to be compulsory even in England to drape the legs of one's piano. This Mrs. Grundy of ours, this national fetish, is as essentially vicious a person as any to be found in the world. Hers is the doctrine of clothes with a vengeance; God, nature, and art are so obscene in themselves that not for a moment must they be viewed without them. In her visit to the picture gallery the sight of a marble upon which Michael-Angelo has forgotten to place a pair of trousers quite spoils her day. One cannot help feeling how ironical it is that persons who do nothing but abuse it should exploit this sacred gift of vision."

Mrs. Broke had already begun to recognize that she was no match for her antagonist. He did not play the game as it was understood in the drawing room. He did not mince matters once he began; he was not a picker of phrases. He was a slogger, a swashbuckler, a peripatetic bravo, evidently without experience in the drawing room style of combat.

Our redoubtable lady was piqued. She was not accustomed to being worsted, at her own table particularly, the place of all others where she reigned supreme. Some people might have called it courage on the part of this underbred young upstart to permit himself such directness in argument, but her name for it was less complimentary. Poor Delia, who had followed every phase of the controversy with a painful solicitude for the welfare of her too-intrepid friend, now saw certain subtle evidences, unmistakable none the less to those skilled in the signs, of her mother's pique. The sudden appearance of an odd

sparkle in those cold eyes made her tremble for the young man, as often enough it had made her tremble for her unfortunate sisters and her unfortunate self.

"You astonish me," said Mrs. Broke, lifting her mild voice a little. "Your criticism is terribly scathing, but at least it has the rare merit of candour. Poor Lady Bosket!"

"I did not give my opinion willingly. You will remember I was urged. I fear I do not select if I happen to feel strongly."

"Indeed, no. You are very fearless."

"Foolhardy would be perhaps the more appropriate name at this time of day. Only too fully does one recognize a certain unfortunate cast of temper."

"I agree, Mr. Porter, that your outspokenness may not be without its inconvenient side," said Mrs. Broke, hoisting herself smoothly on the *amende* he had offered. "May it not at times become a little embarrassing to poor Lady Bosket?"

"She has not suffered at present under my unfortunate controversial method, I am happy to say."

"After all that is not unnatural. But I would ask, does it strike you as quite politic that one should disseminate these opinions of Lady Bosket and her work?"

"Politic? Forgive me if I appear dense."

"Would it not, do you not think, be somewhat wounding to poor Lady Bosket if it came to her knowledge that one in whom she happens to take a peculiar interest held such heretical opinions concerning her?"

"Forgive me if I venture to ask on my own part whether the word 'politic' does not call for a stronger qualification?"

"Perhaps it might not be altogether politic for you to insist upon a stronger one."

"I am prepared to take the risk."

To Delia's dismay, the cold brilliant hardness was ever growing in her mother's eyes.

"Have you not in a sense been taken up by her?"

"Forgive me if I crave for a little more explicitness."

"Is she not in a sense your patron; I mean, of course, somewhat after the fashion that in happier days persons

of a pre-eminently fortunate position stood in that relation to art and those who practise it?"

The young man laughed imperturbably. The time-honoured feminine method of retaliation below the belt did not distress him. He saw that our redoubtable lady had lost her temper.

"I confess I had not thought of it," he said cheerfully. "But I think the idea is not without its whimsicality."

He laughed again.

Mrs. Broke had no particular reason to be solicitous for the reputation of her sister-in-law, but superb as was the control she habitually kept upon herself for the moment it was gone. She was genuinely angry. Her red face had grown a shade redder; the expanse of her smile had grown a fraction more expansive; and the grim light the frightened Delia had observed in her eyes was now burning more coldly and oddly than ever.

"I gather that you do not find the idea wholly devoid of amusement?" she said, following up her mellowest accents.

"I will not deny that it has a flavour, although it may suggest the Elizabethan."

"Have not the Elizabethans ever been the theme of our admiration?"

"I grant it; but would you not say that their methods at this time of day are apt to seem a little remote?"

"Still, Mr. Porter, I must admit that I have heard of a number of even *literary* persons who esteem it an honour to have incurred the notice of Lady Bosket."

"I hope you will pardon my amusement if it is at all likely to become offensive. To myself the idea seems so new. It had never occurred to me that our few and very formal relations were in danger of being construed in that light."

"You appear to repudiate them."

"Not at all; on the contrary I am anxious that an exaggerated notion of my status should not get abroad."

The simplicity of his way of saying this somewhat baffled his fair antagonist. The demure assumption of his mildness was in nowise behind her own. And she was intelligent enough to feel that his was vastly the more

delicate. She was hitting below the belt, which she knew; but it seemed she was not to have it all her own way. Where a fighter of the other sex would have admired his skill and tenacity in the face of a great disadvantage and a peculiar, his fair antagonist deplored his effrontery in venturing to defend himself.

"I observe that your amusement is unconquerable," she said. "You force me to concede the occasion for it. But please allow me to say that in the first instance I was not conscious of having provided it."

"Nor, if you will allow me to say so, do I think you are conscious now. One can see that it might not be apparent to some; to me I confess it is strikingly so. Not to put too fine a point upon it, I was not aware that I was in the enjoyment of the avowed, the authentic patronage of Lady Bosket. It gives one rather the same influential status that the legend 'Appointment by Royal Warrant' he hangs over his door does to the royal grocer. It is a novel feeling, but a happy one, doubtless, when one becomes accustomed to the glamour."

Again the young man's laugh was heard, but the total absence of mirth in it implied that he had yet to arrive at this equable condition of mind.

Mrs. Broke was now ready to decline the contest. She was growing tired; and without being willing to admit that she had been actually defeated, she did not think she had shone. She hastened, therefore, to scramble back to the safe ground of the influence of Beowulf on the early Augustine Fathers.

She could not rid herself of a dim feeling that for once, with all her stupendous social experience, she had been led into error. The tact upon which so rightly she plumed herself had been at fault. She was not sure of the direction in which the error lay, or exactly how it had been made, but the uneasy consciousness remained to her that the latter part of the conversation had not been quite a success. She was driven to solace herself with the reflection that at those uncomfortable moments when one rubbed shoulders with the members of the lower orders, it was incumbent upon one to remember that these little clashes must arise. There could be no doubt he was a very un-

couth fellow. He was a healthy specimen probably of that strange product of our modern system of universal education, the social democrat. He was a sort of Labour leader in embryo, doubtless. Not only was his conceit insufferable, but he was totally lacking in refinement. He seemed to think that everything he said became him. One would have supposed he would have gained a certain sort of social nous at the university. She hoped piously that poor dear Edmund would not stumble across him. If he did the poor dear fellow would have a fit!

When the young man had taken his departure, the ruffled lady spent some time in meditating on her course. Should she write and tell Emma or should she not of the kind of person her choice had proved to be? Had she consulted her private feelings she would have sat down there and then, and have given him his *congé*. But after all there was Emma to be grappled with. Emma held an eminent position in the category of those whom we designate as "touchy." There was no saying how she might take it. After the encomiums she had lavished on the man, she might make it a personal matter if this particular gift horse were looked in the mouth. And they could by no means afford to quarrel with Emma. Apart from the sensation of personal pique, which the redoubtable lady was too thoroughly the woman of affairs not to be able to swallow, it really did not matter who instructed Delia in Latin and mathematics. It would have been more agreeable for the child, certainly, could she have had one less uncouth to direct her studies, but it was not as though he was going to be her model of deportment and manners. Besides, it would do her no harm to suffer a little hardship; would it not be in keeping with the Spartan tradition on which all her girls had been brought up? And again, as Emma had said, with surprising penetration, "With a man of that kind there cannot be danger!"

Our redoubtable lady having entered into the matter, not without a certain zest that a knotty question will excite in an energetic intelligence, presently enlisted the assistance of Delia, who was in a position to throw additional light on the young man's *bêtises*.

"I am afraid, child, you found your tutor something

of a trial. Still, it is not wholly wise to increase your prejudice against him. For your Aunt Emma's sake you must try to have patience; although, to be sure, I have a great mind to acquaint her of the terms in which he refers to her work, and the manner in which he regards her kindnesses towards him."

"What kindnesses, mother?" Delia's curiosity enabled her to ask.

"I am surprised, child, that you should ask the question. You must know that when a person in your Aunt Emma's station in life confers her notice on a person in his, it is a great favour. It is wholly through her interest that he comes out here to teach you."

Delia shivered. She seemed to grow chill and a little faint; the blood ran out of her face suddenly.

"I don't think he looks at it in that light at all, mother," she found the courage to say. As she spoke the blood ran as suddenly back into her face, and seemed to burn with a heat intenser for its banishment.

"I am afraid he does not. It is what I complain of in him."

For the life of her, Delia could not see precisely what it was that her mother complained of in her friend. She was aware, in a vague fashion, that she was very inexperienced, but look at the matter in what aspect she might, she could not tell wherein he had offended. It might be his frank criticism of the writings of Aunt Emma. Yet it could hardly have been that, because her mother had insisted that he should make it; and he had spoken with a conviction that was very honest. Surely she was not going to blame him for his integrity. Did he not mean every word he said, and was he not so brave as to utter just his own private thoughts? No, she was sure there must be some deeper-seated reason. But whatever the nature of his fault, she was never so firmly convinced of anything as that it would be unfair to visit him with blame. She was sure he had not consciously incurred a reproach.

Prior to to-day she had only been brought into intimate relation with three men in all her young life; and they were her father, her brother, and her uncle Charles She

had been able dimly to recognize the fine masculine attributes in each of these heroes, but the hours she had passed in the library with her tutor that morning had far more powerfully affected her with the significance of the masculine character.

Now that they were no longer face to face, and she was able to look back impartially upon their meeting, an extraordinary power seemed to have resided in him. Without making any particular effort, without insisting in any way upon his great reserve force, his will had dominated hers in the completest manner. He had wrung her secrets out of her, and he had made her obey his wishes, when nothing was firmer in her than the determination not to obey them. The episode of the destruction of her manuscripts continued to bewilder, to disconcert her.

The dominion of your men of power may prove unfortunate. It is well they are not always cognisant of the potency they wield; were it otherwise existence would be in danger of becoming a more tragic thing. Nor is it exclusively from among the weak and the lowly they would draw their victims; it too often argues a subtle kinship between their own masterful magnetic force and those natures it is their fate to overpower. In many respects poor Delia had the callowness of mind and heart of the most unsophisticated child of them all. The accents of the nursery were as yet hardly out of her voice; but that strange film floating above the hidden depths of her eyes, the heartily despised of her sisters, had a meaning. The old eternal mysteries lurked below the curtain. Nebulous and fragile it might be, tenderly vague and at present so indefinite that only one pair of eyes was cunning enough to suspect the existence of it at all, it was yet no light and vapid spirit that brooded in that abyss. There was there a soul to surrender; a nature to wrench; a heart to be made to bleed. In a sense nothing could have been more inimical to her development, as a member of the community in which she made a unit, than that at a season so susceptible she should be thrown into the toils of a nature so powerful that it might crush her into dust without being conscious that it touched her.

Later in the afternoon her sisters returned from hunting

to find Delia curled up in the recesses of the cosiest chair of their common room. A brisk fire was before her, and she was reading the mustiest old book imaginable: the Works of Jeremy Taylor, D.D., volume iv.

CHAPTER XI

In the Temple of Diana

IT was their custom on their return from the field to come there in their muddy attire, and revive the events of the glorious day, while they refreshed their weariness with weak tea and bread and butter cut in very thick slices. They were in a fine state of excited satisfaction this afternoon. The runs had been so entirely delightful, that after some little argument, whereby they hoped their temerity would grow less, they resolved to commemorate the occasion and make it a festival by asking for preserve for tea.

The resolve itself was easy, but it involved a special degree of hardihood to put it into execution. Had it been possible to prefer the request directly to the cook, it would not have been at all difficult; but it might mean summary dismissal for that tender-hearted functionary if she inclined her ear. As cook had been known to declare, it was more than her place to send them up so much as a jug of cream on Sundays. The matter was even outside the jurisdiction of the housekeeper. No; demands of that kind had to be preferred to their mother in her own proper person. She it was who regulated their *menu* on a fixed principle of the most resolute economy. And such a trepidation had these Dianas whenever they confronted her that in the absence of volunteers for the heroic duty they resorted to conscription by the ballot-box. In other words they wrote their six names on six small pieces of paper, rolled them up, and shook them together in an old boot. Joan then drew out one with great solemnity.

It bore the name of Delia. They were almost certain

it would bear the name of Delia, because it had become a proverb among them that Delia was very unlucky. Exact science had been able to establish the fact that she had been born on a Friday. Everything disagreeable seemed to befall her as if by the agency of an evil magic. Had they been in the least imaginative, they must have felt that some malevolent fairy had presided at her birth. They would have asked no more salutary proof of it than that she should be taken in hand by Aunt Emma. That was the crowning instance of her wretched luck. Poor little kid! All the same, when she was haled out of her comfortable chair in front of the fire and bidden to resign the Works of Jeremy Taylor, D.D., volume iv., to go forth on her diplomatic errand, she was instructed to remind her mother that it was precisely two months and three days—the occasion was marked on the calendar in sedulous red ink—since they had been allotted their previous pot of preserve, and although it had been only a small pot they had made it last nearly a week.

Delia, however, was very soon back again. Her interview with the presiding deity had been brief and to the point.

"Mother says certainly not."

Accepting this fiat with a readiness that went to show they had expected it, they fell upon the ungarnished slices of thick bread and butter, and the butter was not by any means in proportion to the bread, with no absence of resolution. They had had a splendid day. Four times had they found; three times had they killed, and the other fox had gone to ground. They had run from Bobbet's Gorse to the Dog Holes in twenty minutes, and Uncle Charles had said he would defy the Quorn to do it in less. They had been in the same field as hounds most of the time; all except Margaret, who was obliged to be careful of the Doctor's off foreleg, and therefore dared not put him at the bullfinch at the bottom of Coplaw Hill, the particularly beastly one with the very bad take-off, and had therefore to go round by the gate. But everybody else had brought it off all right, although Jane, as usual, had picked the wrong place—Jane blushing vividly—and if Pat had not been so clever, she must have had him down.

Uncle Charles said that, take it altogether, it was one of the best days he had had since he had hunted the pack; and he had promised Joan, Philippa and Harriet a brush apiece, although Hat might easily have spoilt everything when she nearly let Whitenose put his foot on Madrigal.

"I am sure I did not," said the indignant Harriet.

"Oh, Hat, how can you?" cried the other four. "Why, Uncle Charles looked at you himself and said, 'Woa there, back pedal!'"

"Oh, you mean then," said Harriet with an air of relief that was very marked indeed. "That was only because I was going out of my turn through the gate. I only squeezed in front of that red-headed young farmer on the rawboned grey with the long tail, and he twice made a noise when hounds were casting."

This explanation being deemed satisfactory to the Court, the narrative resumed its harmonious flow. Their father, although riding Porlock up to fifteen stone, led the whole field at Mounsey's Brook, and covered himself with honour by making a successful cast when hounds were at fault in the Spinney, Uncle Charles being left behind for the moment in the Triangle. Lord Croxton had been tossed rather badly when his mare, the most beautiful chestnut they had ever seen, with perfect thoroughbred shoulders, had refused a fence in the last field but one on the left going into Caisby from High Moreton. Uncle Charles said it would have served the beggar right if he had broken his neck, because he ought to have known better than to put her at it when she was done, although Uncle Charles said you could not expect to find old heads on young shoulders all the same.

"It was his second horse, too, so you will see the sort of day it has been," said Margaret.

"It was the last field but two coming into Caisby," interposed Philippa at this point, doggedly, She had an air of reflection that showed she had been thinking the matter over carefully.

"One," sang the other four.

"Two," said Philippa, more doggedly than ever. "It is the one with the cow hovel in one corner, and the row of pollard elms at the top end just as you get in."

"Flip's right," said Joan with decisive gravity. "What a stupid mistake to make! Of course it is the second; the one that had the half-bred two-year-old in it that Uncle Charles said was only fit for Bovril."

"So it was," the rest chimed in. "How stupid we are! And how funny it is that Flip never says anything unless she's sure."

The edge being worn at last off their own exploits, they were able to extend a little commiseration to Delia. They gave of their sympathy with refreshing frankness.

"Poor old Del," they said. "What a shame to be left out of it like this. You *have* missed a glorious day, and all because it is a fad of Aunt Emma's to send that *awful* young man to teach you Greek and Latin."

Delia blushed deeply at this reference, but they were too pre-occupied with bread and butter to notice it.

"He is not awful," said Delia.

"Oh, Del," they said, "how can you? We rather admire you, of course, for making the best of your bad luck; it is right to make light of a thing when you cannot help it. But he *is* awful, you know he is."

"I don't," said Delia, "and I am sure you do not either."

"That's just what we do know," they sang triumphantly. "We've *seen* him."

"He is not awful," said Delia.

"Yes, he is, Del, you know he is! You are a brick to stick up for him, of course; we'll own it is rather nice of you—shows nice feeling and all that; but how you can stick up for a man like that we don't know. We are sure we could not."

"He does not want any sticking up for."

"No, we should not say he does. He is the sort of man who would only be too ready to stick up for himself."

"No, he would not," said Delia with a fierceness they had never suspected in her. "He is very modest; if mother likes to say he is not, it is not just of her. He has a right to respect himself. If I were as wise and clever as he is, I should respect myself too."

"What has his cleverness got to do with it, if a man is what Billy calls a 'bounder'?"

"He is a gentleman," said Delia.

"Why doesn't he brush his hat, then?" said Philippa.

"Why does he wear such a silly collar?" said Jane.

"Why does he wear such a wretched old slovenly tie?" said Harriet.

"Why are his clothes so old and his boots so ugly?" said Margaret.

"Because he may be as poor as we are," said Delia desperately.

"Why is he the son of a bookseller?" said Joan.

"Yes, why is he the son of a bookseller?" demanded one and all in breathless chorus.

Delia summoned every spark of her courage.

"Why should he not be?" she said, fighting against the sickness that was stealing along her veins. "It is not a wicked thing to be the son of a bookseller as far as I can see. He is good, and he is brave, and he is clever, and he is a gentleman by nature. I do not see how a man like that can be despised. I am sure that those who do despise him are themselves despicable."

"Delia!" they cried aghast.

"I do not care. You drove me to it."

"Delia!" they shouted. "What would mother say if she heard you talk like this? What would father say?"

"I do not care," said Delia. "It is as I feel; I cannot help my feelings; it is not my fault. Mother was very rude to him at luncheon; and when he had gone she spoke of him cruelly."

"Delia," they shouted, "what *are* you saying?"

"You are just the same," Delia went on in a dreary voice; and just then in a vague fashion her manner recalled that of their Uncle Charles when he had a glass of whiskey in his hand. "You are just as cruel, and I know that father will be still more cruel. How did Aunt Emma speak of him the other day? Now that I know the kind of man he is I can see how horrid it was of her to talk of him like that."

"And now that we have seen the kind of man he is," said Joan in the voice of their father, "we can see that for once justice was on Aunt Emma's side."

"I shall hate you, Joan, if you talk of him like that,"

said Delia wildly; she was losing the hold she had kept on herself all through. "I shall hate everybody; I shall even hate father if he talks like that about him. I shall, I shall! It is cruel, it is unjust!"

She got up, cast down her book, threw herself upon the sofa, buried her head in its dilapidated cushions, and burst into a flood of tears. Her sisters were amazed. None of them were given to manifestations of that kind. They formed no part of their Spartan tenets. And the cause of it was as inexplicable as such a behaviour was unprecedented. There was not a word in all they had said they did not mean, which was not perfectly true. They could not possibly have offended her. True, she might choose to consider they had done so. On thinking it over they could only arrive at the conclusion that she suffered from a sense of injury, which it was impossible to wreak on the person who was responsible for it; but now having found a pretext in an imagined grievance, she was able by proxy to visit her wrongs on them.

This was the only view of her unheard-of conduct to which they could subscribe. They were really sorry for her. Truly it was hard, poor little kid! that she should be condemned to spend her mornings in that miserable way when she would so dearly love to be out hunting like themselves with their father and their Uncle Charles. But, after all, things were not so black as they seemed. They had had it from their mother that this horrid man was only coming out three times a week. Might it not be arranged that he should come on those days when the hounds did not meet? They gave their terribly distressed youngest sister the comfort of this suggestion.

"It might even be arranged that one of the days should be Sunday," suggested Philippa, the weighty and the practical.

Strangely enough, however, their earnest attempts at consolation had no effect on Delia's passionate grief. Never in their lives had they seen any one weep so bitterly. From the manner of her distress they might have inflicted an injury upon her that hurt her cruelly, instead of one which, if it had an existence at all, could only be in her young imagination. But they were simple creatures, who

were soon moved to remorse. Aftèr all, they should have been more careful. Some of the things they had said of the tutor had perhaps been intended to tease her a little; and they ought not to have been guilty of a suspicion of that sort of thing, when the poor little kid was only too likely to have an accumulation of trouble in her heart.

Joan, the eldest, the spokeswoman on every public occasion for them all, begged her pardon gravely, Had they only known, they would certainly not have breathed a word against her tutor in badinage or otherwise. Not for a moment had they thought it likely that she would resent it. Joan was good enough to add that she thought it rather chivalrous of her to stick up for him like that, notwithstanding what her real private feelings must be; that it was plucky of her, and that she was a brick. Such a fine *amende* from Joan, who was ever foremost in snubbing her—she it was who first propounded the brilliant and original conundrum: "Why is Delia like a chair?—Because it is her nature to be sat upon"—they felt was a lordly compensation for her fancied wrongs.

Nothing they could say or do, however, had the power to console her. She still buried her face in the sofa-cushions while the sobs were shaken out of her. The distress they had innocently provoked distressed them too. But they could find no remedy for it; they spoke kind words to her, spoke kind words about her, and blamed themselves in vain. More and more were they puzzled, for they could gain no clue to this extraordinary exhibition of her grief. And when at last reluctantly they left her still surrendered to her woe, and went to doff their riding-habits and to dress for dinner, their minds were exercised dreadfully over this painful problem. And well they might be, since Delia was as greatly puzzled to account for her own irrational behaviour as were her sisters themselves.

CHAPTER XII

Maud Wayling

DURING dinner that evening their mother made an announcement. Miss Wayling was coming to stay with them during the time that Billy was home on leave. She was expected to arrive on the following morning, and Billy was to come from Windsor in the evening. That was a more generally cheerful meal than they had known for a long time. Everybody seemed happy, with the exception of Delia. She, it was true, was pre-occupied and looked rather sad, and her eyes were red. But she could scarcely be said to be a chief factor of their dinner-table intercourse. Her unhappiness hardly counted, when against it could be set the shining looks of their father. To-night the weight of care they had begun to discern upon him lately was no longer to be seen. They had his frank jovial laugh in their ears,—to his daughters there was no music like it; he took a new interest in the things around him; he discussed the doings of the day, compared notes with them thereupon, and twice he made a joke. Their mother, too, was wonderfully smiling and serene. True, she invariably was, but to-night it did seem as if her demeanour was not an effort of the will; it was as though her heart co-operated with her mind in the determination to be cheerful. Even she, the most restrained and self-controlled of women, seemed a little flushed by the prospective coming of Miss Wayling.

The girls themselves were inclined to be a little excited by it. In a vague way they had come to understand that Miss Wayling was a sort of fairy godmother at the touch of whose magic wand the precarious fortunes of them all might in a sense be resuscitated. It was settled

that she was to marry Billy very soon; and somehow it was expected of her that she would make their father and mother happier, and thereby indirectly make them happier too. All the same they were not sure they would be able to love her just at first. At present they were disposed to be a little in awe of one in whom such splendid superhuman attributes were invested.

Joan was the only one of them who had seen her. That was at a dance in London during the season in which Joan came out. There, looking from a distance at the superb Miss Wayling, she appeared to be dazzling in her beauty, but it was of a cold proud kind, Joan thought, and she seemed to hold herself aloof. But all present considered she was easily the most beautiful woman in the room. "Miss Wayling makes everybody else look second-rate," she had overheard one old woman saying. All the men seemed to think so too, for wherever she went they followed. A throng of them were constantly coming up to ask to be allowed to dance with her, or to sit out with her, or to get an ice for her, or to take her to supper—men of all ages, ranging from little Mr. Tommy De Lacey-Smith, the wisest of subalterns with nicely brushed hair, to Lord Saint Ives, the patient young man with the weary expression; men of every size and hue, of every grade of the peerage, with a goodly sprinkling of bald, and in many cases obese, but singularly upright and well preserved majors and colonels on retired pay. And it was a strange fact that perhaps the only man in the room on whom this magnetic influence appeared to be exerted in vain was Billy himself. He scarcely went near her all night; and he confided to Joan on one occasion: "I see Maud's *en fête* again as usual. I can't understand what all these chaps see in her. I suppose she *is* good-looking in her way; but it is not my way, anyhow. Too stand-off is our Miss Maud." Joan had remembered that speech word for word, because she had an excellent memory. And was it not strange that things should now have come round like that after Billy had spoken of her so cavalierly?

Considering all things, our six critical ladies began with a prejudice against Miss Wayling. No matter how pleased their father and mother might be at the prospect of her

coming—and it was delightful to see them both for once so unaffectedly happy—no matter what glowing accounts they gave of her loveliness of mind, of person, of disposition, they felt instinctively that they were not going to like her just at first. Try as they might—and to do them justice, they tried very hard indeed, for the sake of their parents and their brother—they found it impossible to eradicate the unfavourable impression she had already made upon Joan, and through Joan upon them all. Then again she had the entire approval of Aunt Emma. No more damning fact could have been urged against her. It was enough in itself in their eyes to condemn an angel from heaven.

The next morning, about twelve o'clock, dear old Reynolds the coachman—dear old Reynolds, whose face was like a pudding, just as dear old Porson's was like a frog's!—brought the hideous fat ramshackle old omnibus up to the front door in his most stately manner. He had on his best blue livery, carefully preserved through many summers and winters, with the silver buttons on it shining in the February sun like veritable Koh-i-noors; and the old cockade to his hat, perfectly solemn and majestic it was so upright and full of self-esteem. Wilkins the footman, who shared the box, was a worthy companion for him, so completely did he appear to be possessed by a sense of the occasion. The splendid high-bred airs they wore so easily, without seeming for a moment to be aware that they had them on, had been the envy for at least two generations of the servants of all the other aristocratic families of the county. The mien of these two elderly custodians of the dignity of the house of Broke was perfection if anything human ever was. It was to the manner born. If aught could have embellished the wretched old vehicle of which they had the charge surely their demeanour would have done it. Weak the flesh of this ancient family might be, but the spirit was still inordinately willing. Elderly, gout-ridden Wilkins performed something of the nature of an acrobatic feat by the agility with which he got down from the box-seat to the door of the omnibus.

Our critical ladies were the witnesses of these proceedings

from the window of their common-room, which by a signal good fortune overlooked them. Six slender bodies were wedged before the casement like so many puppies peeping out of the door of a kennel. They were too excited to speak, but gazed intensely. There were six pairs of eager feminine eyes for everything. Piles of luggage were on the roof of the 'bus; great black dress-baskets; and most alluring-looking cases made of leather of every conceivable shape and size. Such a display of personal belongings struck the first note of awe. There seemed to be two occupants of the 'bus. The one that first emerged from it was not at all distinguished in appearance; the sight of her filled them with a keen sense of disappointment. Of course; how stupid! it was her maid. They ought to have known that such a princess of a creature could not possibly come without her maid.

The next moment they obtained a glimpse of some very remarkable feathers stuck in a very remarkable hat. They were then privileged to see a long travelling-cloak, which was lined and trimmed with expensive-looking fur. They could see nothing of the person in it, except that she was exceptionally tall, and somewhat inclined to be pale. She carried her head in the air, loftily they thought, quite as you would expect a veritable princess to carry it. Her carriage and manner of walking were splendid also. They could only see the back of her cloak to be sure, but they felt they had never observed motions quite so graceful and beautiful before.

It thrilled them to see their mother, least demonstrative of women, come down the steps to greet the august visitor, and kiss her affectionately on both cheeks. Their mother looked radiant, and then as Miss Wayling gathered her skirts and cloak in her hand as she made to enter the house—for it had been raining recently and the gravel was wet—they saw she had real lace on her petticoats!

In the hall there seemed to be a commotion of welcome. Their mother's high tones mingled with the sounds of the unlading and entry of the numerous boxes. And through the open door of their own room they could hear the deeper tones of their father too. Within the next minute he was there to summon them.

"Come along, girls," he said, entering their domain. "No hanging back; come and give Miss Wayling a welcome."

He ushered the six of them into the hall proudly and gravely. Whenever he presented them to a stranger he could never dissemble the pride of possession they provoked in him. It was unspoken; but it was always so unmistakable in his manner that people were sometimes apt to be amused by it. If they had been six of the greatest beauties, his sense of ownership could not have been keener.

Joan was first presented to Miss Wayling, and then Philippa, and then the others in the order of their first appearance in the world. Precedence was a point on which they were very nice. It would have been unpardonable had one of them ventured to stand forward out of the turn ordained by the date of her birth. Miss Wayling and our six ladies of the house of Broke eyed one another and shook hands gravely. In a moment Billy's sisters had all agreed that never had they seen any one quite so beautiful as Miss Wayling. And in the same instant of time they had all learned to be a little afraid of her.

There is an air of reticence, of mystery, about great beauty, as though the possessor of it dwells on a plane remote from the common earth, and inhales with her divinely sensitive nostrils an ether rarer and purer than our own. No sooner had she turned her great grey eyes on her new friends with a steady penetrating gaze, which in another might have amounted to no more than a certain candour of contemplation, than they shrank a little from them, and felt themselves to be justified already of their prepossession.

When presently they sat down together at the luncheon-table, and Miss Wayling had removed her travelling-cloak, they recognized with the perfect candour of their honest characters that her loveliness was even greater than they had suspected it to be at first. She was built as nobly as a goddess; divinely tall of person, her chest and shoulders had the magnificent amplitude of some Grecian deity; her shape was a miracle of curve; the poise of her head was splendid and patrician; her complexion shone with a pallid brilliancy which gave her the cold marble look of

a piece of sculpture that their Aunt Emma had insisted on; and her wonderful grey eyes were like immeasurable lakes brooding in the heart of a dark forest haunted with mystery.

The resplendent creature had not much to say. Their mother indicated many topics of conversation with her usual unflagging tact of intercourse. But beyond admitting that it had turned out a nice day after all, although it was raining when she left London, and that she was glad Billy was to arrive that evening in time for dinner, she uttered scarcely a word. No subject seemed to interest her very much, and before luncheon was over she wore a look which they took to mean that she was being bored a little by the proceedings. It was with peculiar relief that they watched her accompany their mother to the drawing-room. Her way of doing it was really the poetry of motion, and the lofty manner in which she carried that perfectly exquisite head struck them as one of the most dignified and patrician things in human nature.

Not one of them had addressed a word to this regal creature. They felt it might be construed into an act of presumption; the queen must first speak to humbler persons before etiquette permits them to speak to her. For precisely the same reason they had carefully refrained from anything that could be interpreted as overtures or advances. It might be taken as an act of forwardness or impertinence; whatever they did they must guard against the risk of a snub; never before in their lives had they found themselves to be so sensitive. That cold, immaculate, exquisite face would have made any one sensitive. They felt that if in any way, however slight, she were to reject or fail to reciprocate the least of their attempts at friendliness, they would not be able to recover of the humiliation it would cause. Let her only make one small show of indifference towards them, let her only give herself the faintest suspicion of an air in her most perfunctory dealings with them, and they felt they would be obliged to dislike her at once.

Assembled in their den that afternoon, Delia astonished her five sisters immensely by bursting into a rhapsody on the subject of her looks.

"She is like a beautiful picture," said their youngest sister in a hushed voice. "I think I should have to break into tears if I looked very long at her face. I did not know that there were any real live women of flesh and blood who are as beautiful as that. I have often wondered why great poets fell in love with women, but I think I know now. She is just like some beautiful picture that has come out of its canvas and learned how to breathe. But the colours in her face and hair and the lights in the curves of her neck make you feel that the artist was divine who painted her. Oh, how beautiful, how very beautiful she is!"

Tacitly, they all agreed with Delia. She was almost too beautiful; and her clothes were very beautiful too. No wonder that the world vied with itself in flattering and courting her. But they did wonder that one so supremely fortunate in her circumstances was not more gay. You would have thought that such a favourite of nature would be always laughing and singing for very joy and lightness of heart; but no, she seemed not happy at all, and barely content with her lot. Not once had they seen her smile, whilst she did not seem to extend an interest to anything.

A little later in the afternoon Uncle Charles and Aunt Emma called and took a cup of tea. It was highly unusual that they should arrive together, but their common interest in the momentous event was doubtless the reason. There could be no more emphatic sign of its significance than that the lion and the domestic lamb should be lying down together. Their Uncle Charles generally went to other places on compulsion, but he came over nearly every day from Hipsley, when he was at home, to have a few words with their father and mother, and to see his nieces. He said they were such plain, sensible people that they suited him, although, to be sure, he said their father's whisky was the worst he had ever tasted in his life, and that his soda water was worthy of it. He could unfold his sorrows to them, however, and be quite sure of their sympathy, even if it was not expressed. Besides, he took an interest in them for themselves, the more particularly now that their affairs were reaching such an acute stage. Uncle Charles came willingly to "see the filly."

Aunt Emma was in great feather. She was extraordinarily kind and gracious to Miss Wayling, and it was wonderful how kind and gracious she could be when she chose; stared at her very hard indeed; made flattering comments upon and about her; and all the time she talked with her voice at its highest pitch about books and travel and London Society; did dear Maud know this person and that, and had she heard about so-and-so?—all with a condescending familiarity that they had never observed in that paragon of austerity before. She was even kind enough to say that when dear Maud became bored to distraction in her present environment, a contingency that was inevitable and a work of time only, she must come over to Hipsley and spend a day or two with her.

"I pity you, my dear Maud," said the kind lady. "My nieces are six of the dullest and most unprepossessing creatures in England. No intellect, my dear, no intellect! They are horsey, and I daresay, my dear, you have noticed in a woman that the term 'horsey' is a polite euphemism for the commonplace. No wonder their unfortunate mother has found such *insuperable* difficulties in procuring husbands for them. They cannot talk about anything except stables and kennels, and they cannot do anything but sit in a saddle and walk puppies. I would not advise you to talk to them much, my dear Maud; they will give you a distaste for your sex, I am sure. But, of course, I had forgotten that my nephew is coming this evening. His presence should make amends for theirs, although I must confess to my mind he, too, is a very commonplace young man."

When Aunt Emma made this kindly reference to their brother, Maud Wayling betrayed an interest in the proceedings almost for the first time. She opened her eyes at Aunt Emma, and a faint tinge of colour mottled the pallor of her cheeks.

Their brother was expected to arrive at Cuttisham by the seven o'clock train. About the hour of six a telegram was delivered to their mother with the information in it that he could not come that night as he was unavoidably detained. Maud Wayling was then observed to flush for

the second time, perhaps a little more palpably than the first. She asked permission to read the telegram herself.

"Why," she said, "it was handed in in Piccadilly. He is not detained at Windsor then."

The flush deepened.

Dinner was a very dull affair. A reaction from his late good spirits seemed to have come upon their father, and even their mother had not her former gaiety. Maud Wayling scarcely spoke a word. It was a relief to the girls when the rather miserable function was at an end. They had looked forward to that evening's meal with feelings so different. It was to have been hallowed by the presence of the joyous brother whom they loved so well. They could have wept for disappointment; the weary entertainment fell the flatter for anticipations that were unfulfilled. For once even their appetites seemed to feel it, and did not crave for a second helping of their favourite cabinet pudding. And more than ever were they convinced that they did not like Maud Wayling. Her silence made them uncomfortable and apt to be self-conscious; they thought she held them aloof; hers seemed a proud and self-contained sort of nature.

The next morning hounds met as usual. Courtesy required that they should ask Miss Wayling if she hunted, and as she had brought no horses of her own they must be prepared to mount her with their own scanty stable. They fervently hoped that she did not hunt, not for that rather sordid reason alone, but because they would have to look after her, and pilot her across a strange country. It was with relief that they heard her make the statement that she did not care for hunting. They quite expected she would choose not to go with them, but it was comforting to have the official confirmation of that prophecy.

Billy did not come that day, nor the day after, nor yet for many days. His absence was inexplicable. His mother wrote to him twice; once to his quarters at Windsor, and once to his club in London. She did not receive an answer to either of her letters. It was the strangest thing! No one could conceive what had happened to him. A fortnight had passed since his leave had begun; he knew that Miss Wayling was staying at Covenden, and he had certainly

made his mother a promise that he would pay one of his infrequent visits to his home to meet her. His absence was a mystery.

Maud Wayling made no comment on the matter, one way or another, but to the relentless feminine observers by whom she was surrounded it was plain that she felt it in her impercipient fashion. She spoke less and less if that were possible; but the flush they had managed once or twice to surprise in her face seemed to grow deeper every time it appeared, and these last few days it had appeared so often that they thought it was becoming permanent.

In the meantime public attention had been called to the affair. A paragraph had been circulated in the London society newspapers, the *Cuttisham Advertiser* and the *Parkshire Reporter*, in which a rumour was contained that Miss Wayling, heiress and only child of the late Charles Wayling, Esq., of Calow, co. Salop, was to marry Mr. W. E. Broke, of the Royal Horse Guards. The rumour was the more interesting, said these newspapers, because Miss Wayling was reputed to be one of the wealthiest and was incontestably one of the most beautiful heiresses of many seasons, while Mr. Broke belonged to one of the first county families in England, and was a well known and highly popular figure in society.

The young man's absence began to be talked about by those who had grown aware of it. Lady Bosket had remarked upon it to her neighbours and acquaintances; they in turn diligently remarked upon it to theirs. Lord Bosket commented on it freely. He was such a simple man, so forthright and ingenuous, that not for an instant did it occur to him that his frankness might be doing harm. He felt that the case of Maud Wayling and his nephew was so precise a parallel of a certain one upon which he was never weary of expatiating, that to deny himself the pleasure of pointing the moral of it was too much to ask of the victim of that eternal tragedy.

"I tell you what it is," he said with his irresolute fingers trembling on the buttonhole of anybody and everybody, "the colt's shyin'. Knows a thing or two, what? Education's spread a bit since my time. These young fellers

know nearly as much as their grandmothers now; compulsory School Boards and so on are doin' a lot. And if I had known as much twenty years ago as does that boy, do you think I would not ha' shied too? I'd ha' played old Harry before they'd ha' popped the halter on me. There's no gettin' your head once they've got that on. But bless you, I was ignorant then; I went to church as dumb as a dog because I knew no better. But Master William does, I give you my word. He knows better. These young 'uns are so fly nowadays, God bless you! that they won't even put their monickers to a money-lender's bill without they've got their lawyers with 'em. But I'm not goin' to blame the feller. I should ha' done the same if at his age I'd known as much."

The matter was becoming awkward indeed. Miss Wayling still preserved her unfailing reticence even to Mrs. Broke, but the persons around her were inclined to suspect that she felt it painfully. But even the Misses Broke, those inexorable critics, were fain to admit that she bore it well. Their dignity almost allowed them to be sorry for her privately, She had been a fortnight in their house already, but there was no likelihood of their becoming her friends. She could not be said to enjoy a whit more of their confidence or companionship than on the day of her arrival. All the same these aloof young people could discern that in her cold proud way she thought a lot of their brother. That fact, at least, had to be counted to her for righteousness. And they even went the length, such an instinct they had for justice, of half-admitting that if by any chance it was possible for that hero not to act with absolute credit to himself, here was the occasion on which he was engaged in so doing. Those were sore days for their mother, but they could not refrain from admiring the resolution that was hers. To everybody she wore the same indomitable smiling exterior. Their father, poor man, had no such arts as these for his protection. He was angry and astonished and hurt; and anybody who wished to know how much so had only to look into his face to see for themselves.

At last, when his friends had been made so thoroughly uncomfortable that his father had vowed that it must be

endured no more, and declared his intention of running up to London to rout the fellow out of his club—his father was certain that he was to be found in Piccadilly playing bridge—he had the grace to write a few bald lines to his mother. They conveyed the information that he proposed to arrive at Covenden on the evening of the following day. He would reach Cuttisham by the seven o'clock train, the one he had been prevented from coming by before; but he regretted that he would not be able to solace them with his company for more than a night and a day, for by now he had made such a hole in his leave that it did not extend beyond that rather limited period.

His father fulminated when this letter was shown to him, and protested that he would have it out with the fellow. What did he mean by it? Behaviour like that was monstrous, and would no more have been tolerated by his parents in him than he would have thought of inflicting it upon them. Then it was in the face of this so very unusual outburst of their father's that Maud Wayling first showed a disposition to confess an interest in the delicate subject.

"It may not be his fault," she said. "I am convinced there is a good reason for his absence."

"Why did he not write before then?" said their father, unpacified.

"I am sure there must be some excellent reason," quietly persisted Maud Wayling.

"I agree with you, my dear Maud," said their mother. "I am sure you are right; and, Edmund, I hope you will not mention the subject to him until he has taken the opportunity of giving me an explanation privately."

As usual, their father bowed to the ruling of their mother. It was his invariable habit in all matters of a political kind.

That was the first moment in which Maud Wayling betrayed any signs whatever of rising in the esteem of her critics. They were not sure that it was not rather nice of her to stick up for their brother publicly when he was out of favour. And on the face of it they could not refrain from thinking, terribly painful as it was, that he might not deserve to be stuck up for, and that it was actually generous of her to defend him. At any rate, they had not expected

her to do it. So susceptible were they to anything that could be construed into a display of what they regarded as good sportsmanship, that for the moment they felt inclined to inquire a little more closely into the rather harsh judgment they had allowed themselves to form of her. After all, if at a time when she must be hurt by Billy's behaviour she could stick up for him, whether he deserved to be stuck up for or not, she might have her own private code of the rules of the game as well as they had. It was not outside the bounds of possibility that in her own peculiar way she might be capable of being a bit of a brick, just like anybody else.

The following day, upon which this prince among mankind was to arrive at last, actually and irrevocably, and in his own radiant person, could not help dedicating itself to a little flutter and excitement. That was a superbly regulated household, ordered with vigilant care and a fine tradition of propriety in all things, but even it could not remain impervious to the coming of the young prince. There must always be the red carpet for royalty; and although you need not take the trouble to walk as far as the haberdasher's to purchase a few yards of it, because there are rolls upon rolls in the garret which were used in old days for your old friend Queen Anne, still you cannot fail to hear the sounds of the hammers at the moment they are laying it down before your door. And although you cannot help thinking it is inconsiderate to make such a noise just as you are in the throes of composing a mandate to the local station-master not on any account to forget the awning and the mounted police, yet you are not quite sure, lover of repose as you are, that on an occasion of this kind you do not actually welcome a certain amount of fuss. Even the under-servants were aware that the young prince was coming at last; and by the aid of that secret service, all-powerful below stairs, they knew that his coming was fraught with destiny. International issues were at stake. They went almost to the foundations of that decaying empire, whom it had so long been their privilege to serve. Miss Wayling, great heiress and incomparably lovely woman as she was, had not been waiting for Mr. William a whole fortnight for nothing.

They waited dinner for the young man that evening. The girls had never beheld anybody one quarter so beautiful as Maud Wayling as she sat in the drawing-room pretending to read while their mother was knitting and while they, one and all, awaited the arrival of Billy with an anxiety that was almost breathless. This evening she went beyond even herself. There was no disguising the flush of expectancy in her cheeks; nor did she try. Perhaps she knew it would have been an effort made in vain, for there was that in her eyes that gave her away just as effectually and completely. The new glamour residing there and the colour in her face lent her a touch of human warmth and spirit, far more appealing than her more natural marble pallor. She was clothed exquisitely but simply; yet it was the simplicity which came from Paris. It was among their earliest discoveries that all her evening gowns had come from Paris. Her hair was done in such a manner that her maid was certified to be an artist. She came from Paris also. They were too spellbound by her appearance to be sensitive about their own. In the presence of this majestic splendour, overawed and yet delighted by it as they were, they could spare no thoughts for their own wretched, tawdry old frocks of several seasons, and their lank hair twisted and coiled into unwilling order by no fingers cunninger than their own.

This time Billy came. He came with the grace and assurance of the young prince that he was, the young prince who knows no law beyond his own inclination. He placed his hands on his mother's shoulders with arrogant affection.

"Here I am, old Mums!" he said, patting her fearlessly. "Rather rotten of me to keep dinner like this. The rotten train was twenty minutes late out of Paddington. But you don't mind, Mummy? I don't come to see you often."

He then saluted his father cheerfully, Maud Wayling unconcernedly, and his sisters with a laugh, a nod, and a wave of the hand that embraced them all in a manner that was the perfection of the casual and the friendly.

Without further preface or apology from the young man, they went in to dinner. Never was there such a cheery soul. He overflowed with good blood and high

spirits; a perfectly frank, jovial, honest wholesome young gentleman, with the merriest laugh and the sunniest temper to be found in the world. From the moment he came into a room you could not help falling in love with him, He was the ideal type of the Englishman, a superb, graceful, agile animal six feet high, with every muscle in play; a fair-haired, fair-skinned Saxon Adonis, with a great heart swelling with courage, and a head not over-burdened with brains. The very striking features of his family, which could hardly be said to adorn the countenances of his sisters, were to him a decided embellishment. The admirable large equipoise and symmetry of his magnificent physique were able to carry off their obtrusive characteristics. He had a complexion that any woman might have envied. The pink bloom about it was suffused with health, expensive living, and exercise in the open air. His blond moustache could compete with any in the service. He had a pair of very deep blue eyes, large, bold, wide-set, merry and fearless. It was not to be wondered at that their possessor's great claim to distinction rested on the fact that he was one of the most intrepid "No. 3's" that ever rode on to a polo ground.

To this amiable tyrant every member of his family bowed down. He had his foot on the necks of them all. His mother relented to him; it was no secret that he could twist her round his little finger when he chose. His father might fulminate against him in his absence, even as he had done on this occasion, but at heart, as everybody knew, he could withstand the blandishments of Billy no better than anybody else. Who could withstand his free, merry, affectionate, light-hearted casual way? Certainly not his sisters, least of all. They vied with one another in a proper adoration of this godlike brother. To them he was always the one legitimate young prince who set the fashion of youthful manhood. He had no peer in those reverent eyes.

Everybody tried to spoil him; yet it has to be confessed that he emerged perfectly fresh and unspoilt through all the adulation he received. A close observer, a diver below the surface, a cynic, a person with a prejudice against human nature, might have made an attempt to lay a

sacrilegious finger on a defect in the fabric of this hero-character. They might have suggested that he was a little unthoughtful of others. If that charge can be sustained against a young prince who receives the adulation that is poured upon him from every quarter as his natural right, who accepts the flatteries not only of word but of deed that are lavished upon him by a dazzled universe as so many acknowledgments of the hereditary excellence of one born to the purple, who takes the cream of everything unquestioningly in the simple faith that it is so much tribute paid by vassals to their liege, who, did he refuse their offerings, would be humbled indeed, if that charge can be sustained, it may be urged against Billy with equal justice. He skimmed the cream wherever he went, with sovereign impartiality. He demanded money; it was paid to him; he expended it as lavishly as he could, and demanded more. It is surely not expected of the young prince that he shall stoop to inquire by what means his faithful subjects have replenished the royal coffers. Every golden piece may have been wrung out of their sweating souls in molten drops of blood and tears, but your young prince is not to be troubled, offended possibly, by details of that sordid nature. Never mind the pinching, the scraping, the blind devotion, the strenuous self-denial of these his faithful subjects. They have only to pay their slow-drawn cheques over to his bankers, and they can take it from him that they shall hear no more about it.

On the other hand, his faithful subjects must be wary of demanding anything in return. There were a few privileged things they might crave without impropriety, but it was well they took care to acquaint themselves beforehand that they were not likely to be in any sense distasteful to the royal nature. Your young prince is accustomed to a free hand in everything. It is his right. And this one, nurtured in a becoming fashion, had enjoyed that consideration all his life. Even at Eton he had been the most popular boy in Sixpenny. His winning ways had defeated his masters and playfellows with ridiculous ease. It had been the simplest thing in the world for him to steal what horse his fancy turned to, while his companions, without his charm of manner, were not permitted to look over the

hedge of the field in which that particular quadruped waggled its tail. Whatever he desired did his highness enjoy. It was his right. And by a similar process of reasoning if a particular act, however necessary to the commonweal, was not acceptable to the royal nature, not men, not heaven, not expedience could make it so.

His mother had half suspected this trait long ago. It had yet to be exhibited to the light of day, because, however eagerly his family had contributed its all for his well-being, it had never had the temerity to ask anything in return. He was now about to be called on for the first time.

More than once had the young man, in speech and in letters, avowed his prejudice against Miss Wayling. He had reiterated that "she was not his sort." The plain statement was enough. It is not necessary for your young prince to give reasons. It is enough that the Miss Waylings of the world are not his sort.

They had been thrown together at Windsor. Her guardian, Colonel Rouse, who commanded the regiment of which Billy was an ornament, was an old friend of his people; and as Billy was as high in the favour of his commanding officer as he was in that of all the world else, he was offered every facility for seeing a good deal of Miss Wayling, who, notwithstanding her rounds of country-house visits, and her hosts of acquaintance, yet contrived to pass much of her time under the roof of her guardian. The good colonel was one of Mrs. Broke's oldest friends, one of her sincerest sympathisers, for too well did he know the difficulties with which she was beset; also he was not the least warm among the admirers of her qualities. He was fond of Billy in quite a paternal fashion, and with the connivance of the young gentleman's mother, if not at her instigation, as common friends of both parties were not slow to aver, he foresaw the ultimate welfare of all concerned. His ward had more than would suffice for two. It was not money she wanted, nor a title; she required a man with whom she could be happy. Any woman could be happy with young Broke.

During dinner the young man did not condescend to offer a word in explanation of his strange absence of the

fortnight past. Certainly he referred to his bad luck at the bridge table. In that period he said he had lost one hundred and ninety pounds; an admission which gave colour to his father's theory that his club in Piccadilly had been his hiding-place. The avowal of the loss excited no visible emotion in those who by perpetual pinching and contriving would have to make it good.

"Bad luck, y' know," he said cheerfully. "I wonder why these things make it a rule to happen when it's inconvenient. Last year it wouldn't have mattered, but it's a bit awkward just now. Mess-bills have a knack of going up month by month like the deuce, and I've been having pretty average rotten luck with my ponies lately. By the way, Mummy, I got your cheque all right. Besides, my wretched ruffian of a tailor is getting a bit restive; and these new mess-kit regulations have run things up a trifle, I can tell you. I'd go to some other authorized robber; but it is only the fact that I continue to order new kit, whether I want it or not, that keeps 'em civil. Unreasonable set of people—tailors."

The unreasonableness of tailors formed perhaps the one pregnant fact in the existence of the young prince. The conviction was so firmly rooted in his mind that he looked round the table for the concurrence of all present. A little whimsically he looked round the table for their condolence. His mother smiled humorously, although, to be sure, she took in her breath rather sharp; his father gave a weary guffaw; his sisters spoke as one that tailors were abominable; while Maud Wayling, as usual, did not choose to say anything, but contented herself with looking at Billy steadily with an odd droop in the corners of her mouth.

After dinner Billy, who was the incarnation of animal energy, initiated his sisters into the mysteries of a new parlour game rejoicing in the euphonious name of "ping-pong." For that purpose he produced from a small wooden box an apparatus purchased in Regent Street that afternoon; so that presently the dining-room resounded with the joust of ball and battledore. Billy, of course, was easily first in this martial exercise, although his sisters were fain to admit that Maud Wayling played

a far better game than was expected of her. But she had played before, as Joan made her confess when the eldest daughter of the house of Broke was ignominiously defeated by her in "a love set." The proceedings became really interesting when Joan, whose haughty spirit could not brook defeat, least of all from such hands as these, challenged Miss Wayling to another encounter. But even on this occasion she fared but little better, despite the strenuous efforts she put forth. Again she had to bow the knee to the victorious Miss Wayling, this time biting her lip as she performed that act, and with a special colour in her face.

There was one circumstance that struck Billy's sisters that evening with a degree of surprise. He seemed wholly insensible to the presence of his *fiancée*. He hardly spoke a word to her. In fact, he might be said to avoid her very much in the manner they had learnt to do themselves. Considering the particular relation they had come to stand one towards another, it could not be with him as with them: surely he could not be a little afraid of her, and dislike her a little too. All the same, there was something in his manner towards her which afforded them food for their so-keen individual observation. Collectively, however, their reticence was much too great to allow them to embody their speculations and conjectures in formulas that were capable of circulation even among themselves.

CHAPTER XIII

Affords the Spectacle of a Woman of the World coping with Difficulties

DIRECTLY he had eaten his breakfast on the following morning Billy linked his arm through his mother's in his affectionate familiar manner, as she was on her way to her sitting-room, with the words:

"I say, Mummy, my leave's up to-day; I shall have to get back to quarters, y'know, to-night; and before I go I want to have a word with you privately about something that's—well—er—that's annoyed me."

"That's annoyed you, my lamb," said his mother tenderly, letting her hand lie on his arm. "What can it be, I wonder! I am sure I must hear. To think that anything should have annoyed you, my precious!"

Billy, by the time he had closed the door of the room and secured privacy to their conference, had concluded that he must be careful. He knew his mother's little ways. Therefore he entered into his subject with as little preface as possible.

"You see, it's like this, you wily old woman. They've been sticking their rotten paragraphs into their rotten newspapers about Maud and me. Scores of people have—er—congratulated me during the last fortnight. They've written to me; they've stopped me in the street; they've patted me on the back in theatres and restaurants and at the club; when was the happy day and so on! I've been having a cheery time, I can tell you. If I could only get to know the name of the journalist man who started the game

I would bring an action for libel. Now, I want your advice, Mummy. You are such a wise old bird; you are so *awfully* clever. Ought I to get it contradicted, or would it be better to ignore it? But then, you see, even if I ignore it other people won't."

His mother composed her features into an appearance of preternatural pleasantness. In her suavest, most mellifluous accents she said:

"What an absurd boy it is!"

"Absurd!" said Billy. "Why who likes it to be spread about, printed in the newspapers and so on, that he is going to marry a girl when he has no intention? It is awkward, Mummy, I can tell you."

"I don't quite understand, my pet."

"Why it says in these newspapers that a marriage has been arranged between Maud and myself."

"Well, my precious?"

His mother placed a note of interrogation in her voice in truly beatific fashion.

"Well, Mummy?" said Billy blankly.

For the moment mother and son stood looking at one another in a manner that a third person might have found diverting. There was a humorous twist lurking in the corner of Mrs. Broke's countenance, and an amused smile glittered indomitably in her eyes; while on the other hand the countenance of Billy was rather ludicrously surrendered to amazement.

"Oh! you know it won't do at all!" said Billy, breaking somewhat awkwardly a silence that he felt to be more awkward still. "You are playing a game, you know you are; but it won't do, you know, it won't at all. I can't stand Maud; never could."

His mother very righteously but very tenderly rebuked so cavalier a reference.

"I speak as I feel," said Billy ruefully. "Always did, you know; always shall. Maud's not my sort. She's a bit above my form. I'm a plain sort of chap; don't want anything classy. Maud wants a duke and strawberry leaves and that sort of rot."

"You are talking nonsense, my pet, aren't you? I am sure dear Maud is very fond of you."

"Can't help her good taste. The point is, Mummy, I am not fond of her."

"Prejudice, my pet, prejudice! You do not dislike her; no one could dislike such a dear beautiful girl as Maud. Perhaps you are like the girls; you are just the least little bit in the world alarmed by her. She *is* rather thoughtful and reserved, poor child. However, I am sure that is a feeling that will pass; you must believe me, my dear one, when I assure you that you are all somewhat inclined at present to underrate her nature. You will find it a very sweet and affectionate nature when you grow to appreciate it more."

"I don't appreciate it," said Billy, "and I never shall."

"My angel!" said his mother in tones that sang. "And do you think one of your years has had the experience to form a trustworthy estimate? One must have arrived at a period of complete intellectual and moral development to be a competent judge in a matter of this kind. I will concede that now, at this moment, you may hold yourself more capable of making a selection of a suitable partner for life than your mother could for you, but you must remember that a person who at twenty-five may be acceptable will at fifty, say, be possibly distasteful. Believe me, my precious, there is a certain sagacity, a certain matured knowledge of the world required for the choosing of a wife. You cannot have a new one every year. You cannot order a new one for every phase of mood or change of fashion. One has to choose the qualities that will wear well, as dear old Doctor Primrose said!"

"Suppose I don't want a wife? How do you know I want a wife, Mummy?"

"There again, my precious, I am sure the wise course would be to put yourself in the hands of those who have had a longer, a more comprehensive experience. Surely, my dear one, if your own mother does not know what your requirements are, may I ask who does?"

Billy had no talent for argument, as he would have been the first to admit. He felt keenly the sense of his own impotence in this sort of thing. He felt that the most specious, the most facile, the most superficial of reasoners would have routed him utterly and put him to shame. On

this final point she had urged he had no reply to make to his mother. As soon as it came to argument he knew he could not stand up before her. All the same he was cast in the mould that is tenacious of its ideas. Their paucity rendered them choice. And whatever they might be they were his own, and therefore were sacred in his estimation. Once let one stray into his head, and it became a piece of himself. He was like his father in that. The fact was there to confront all who had to grapple with either father or son, that although they were subscribers to very few ideas indeed, for each had an extreme reluctance to allow such mischievous innovations to establish a footing in their minds, once let them be planted in the virgin territory, and they must be torn from their context of flesh and blood before they could be uprooted. His mother, who had data concerning our young gentleman more efficient than anybody's, could not help feeling that there was a certain inherent perverseness in the fact that one whose mental habit hardly permitted him to keep two notions of his own under his hat was yet found to be in possession at this moment of the one of all others it was least to be desired he should harbour.

The tenacity this one unfortunate little idea imbued in the stubborn rogue enabled him to keep his head up and his flag flying. He might be at a loss to furnish a reply in words to his mother's reasoning, but never fear he had one in his heart. Therefore he continued to confront her doggedly, and not a sign of yielding could be traced in him. To be sure he was rather red and a little agitated by the consciousness he had that he might be claiming kinship with that mysterious zoological specimen, the consummate ass; he hummed and hawed; shifted the weight of his body now on to his left leg, now on to his right; stuck his hands in his pockets; whistled; looked out of window; performed all the manoeuvres known to our acute masculine confusion, but that defiant unreason still remained in him that nothing could defeat. Mrs. Broke had had occasion more than once to deplore it in his father. She had her experiences in handling that John Bull Englishman to guide her in this case of his son. In trifles father and son were alike, inasmuch that therein both would submit cheer-

fully to dictation. On matters they could regard as of no particular importance it was comparatively easy to induce them to listen to reason as dispensed by herself the never failing well-spring, the fountain-head. They were perfectly amenable then. But in the things that mattered they had to be handled with the gloves.

Billy's scruples, or rather his prejudices, would call for some delicacy. The foolish boy would have to be coaxed. His mother saw too plainly that argument, mellifluous as it was when it flowed from her lips, would not have a straw's weight with him. In the fulness of her wisdom, therefore, she decided to waive the matter. With his father's character to guide her, by the light of it, and recalling the mistakes of her early married life, she closed the discussion peremptorily. When the time came she would have to be prepared to force our young gentleman's hand.

Not another word passed between mother and son on this topic. Billy went back to his regiment that afternoon. He went as lightly and cheerily as he came, with a frank adieu to everybody, a smile on his face, a music-hall air on his lips, and a cheque in his pocket-book for a little matter of two hundred and fifty pounds. He returned the same perfectly gallant, hearty, intrepid, delightful fellow. He seemed to have not a care in the world beyond the set of his tie and the spotless state of his boots. His sisters in a body accompanied him on bicycles to Cuttisham Station. All the way up the avenue their voices were uplifted in laughter and merriment, but Billy's was the loudest of any. It was impossible not to be gay, not to be overwhelmingly happy when this most delightful of brothers was of the company. He was as hail-fellow well-met with them as he was with the rest of the world. He chaffed them and teased them; slapped them on the back; called them "old chap"; made them his comrades in everything; and charmed them with his so-charming ways as no one else could ever do. Well might they worship the ground on which he trod!

Maud Wayling was not of this merry party. Billy had taken his leave of her in the drawing-room; a perfectly pleasant and friendly good-bye. A highly-sensitive person

might possibly have discerned a far-away sense of relief in the manner of it. But certainly nothing was expressed in his demeanour of which any one had a right to complain. Still no sooner had the gay voices of Billy and his companions died away down the drive than Miss Wayling ascended to her bedroom, turned out her maid who was inserting lace in an evening bodice, and locked the door. She sat looking into the fire for several hours in a peculiar mechanical way. Some burden had apparently come upon her thoughts. She did not appear again in public until dinner, and then it was remarked by her critics that she was even duller and more listless than before Billy came. Perhaps she was upset by his going away so soon, for certainly they had never seen anybody look so sad as she that evening.

Mrs. Broke spoke to her privately afterwards.

"You must not pay any attention to Billy's offhand ways, my dear child," she said in her caressing voice. "Men *are* like that. They strive to hide their real feelings under a mask of indifference. They are so afraid of giving themselves away, poor dears. And I grieve to say that our poor Billy is as self-conscious as the rest of his sex. I quite understand, my dear child, that it is not unnatural that you should be affected by it; it is very creditable at least to your inexperience and to the warmth of your affection. I recall with some little amusement how miserable I was when the inscrutable self-control of Mr. Broke filled me with similar misgivings. Still one must suppose this romantic attitude to life to be inseparable from girlhood. It was the more remarkable in my case, because I am by nature so determinedly prosaic. Ah me! the tortures of doubt and fear and wounded self-love I endured, and all the time my dear Edmund was morbidly afraid of giving himself away! But believe me, my dear child, you could not wish for a more hopeful augury of the prosperity of your married life. When you have lived a little longer and have come to know men better, I am sure you will understand that the fondest and truest of their sex are those who perpetually strive to conceal in our presence the warmth of the feelings with which they regard us."

Miss Wayling had no reply to offer to these words of solace. They did not seem to remove the gloom from her heart. At Mrs. Broke's earnest solicitation she continued to stay on at Covenden. The kind woman was never tired of protesting that dear Maud was like a seventh daughter to her, and a great comfort to have in the house. She declared that the other six were of a somewhat unsatisfactory sort, who brought no consolation to her maternal spirit. "We have so little in common, my dear Maud. They are so unfeminine; they ought to have been men. I really don't know what I should have done had you been like them."

It was being constantly and clearly indicated to Miss Wayling that the world looked upon her as Billy's *fiancée*. Even his mother acknowledged it in a hundred delicate ways. The girl became puzzled and a little distressed by it, yet in a dim way she supposed it was all right. Her guardian wrote her the kindest letters. He hoped she would stay with her future family as long as she chose. He congratulated her heartily on her good fortune. It was a high privilege for any one to be received among such people as the Brokes. The kind old colonel was very pleased that everything had been arranged so satisfactorily.

Maud, accustomed to depend so much on others—no princess of a reigning house was more carefully hedged about and screened and shielded in every conceivable manner—was compelled to believe that the whole thing was regular. True, Billy had not extended any more of his attention to her of late than was his wont formerly. Ever since the far-off days of their first coming together, nobody had seemed so indifferent to her presence as was he. And now when she had the temerity to hope that he might use a little less austerity in his treatment of her, he neither looked at her, nor spoke to her, nor did he go near her when he could avoid so doing. And he did not favour her with his correspondence. Yet plainly he must have spoken of her to others; how else could the impression of their engagement have been circulated so widely, and affairs have reached their present stage? It was all very mysterious, but she supposed there could only be one ending,

and that the right one, since persons of the widest experience and the deepest wisdom, a cabinet of her chosen ministers, had the matter in hand and were pledged to see it through.

Nevertheless, it was not in the least like what she could have wished it to be. Surely every man could not affect the aloofness of Billy, and observe such a lordly disregard for the conventional object of his affections. There was too much of maiden fancy in her to permit her to think for a moment that it was the custom for marriage to be drifted into in this almost heathen manner. Still in many cases it must be so, or people would have been alive to the phenomenon. Somebody must have advised her of it, were it otherwise. Every day brought letters of congratulation from her wide circle of acquaintance. The announcement in the newspapers had been seen by all. One or two of her girl friends wrote to say how delightful it must be to be in love, and how delightful also to be beloved by such a dear handsome fellow as Billy Broke. One tender young lady of seventeen wanted to know, was it a case of love at first sight? And everybody agreed that she must be quite the happiest girl in the world.

In none of the letters she wrote in reply, not even in that to her guardian, from whom she had never kept a secret before, did she allow herself to make the confession that she could have wished her engagement to be a more romantic affair. She was too proud to confess to anybody, almost too proud to confess to herself that she felt her position keenly. Her nature was too powerfully self-centred not to brood upon a private wrong; but it was too arrogantly sensitive to allow her to open her heart to others and let them see how and why she suffered. The one crumb of solace she could bestow upon herself was that Billy and she had known one another for many years. They had been boy and girl together. He was always at her guardian's in his school days. She was compelled to admit for her own justification that familiarity did breed contempt in a sense, even in two persons engaged to be married.

In the meantime, if Billy wrote no letters to Maud, he sent more than one to his mother. They were conceived

in various keys of unrest. He complained that so far from people allowing the distasteful subject to drop, they continued to insist on it in a manner that annoyed him. It was becoming really offensive: they did not hesitate to take it for granted that he was actually engaged. Even Maud's guardian, who of all men should have known better, treated it as an accomplished fact. The young gentleman did not know when he had been so disturbed. He vowed he would not put up with it. Several times he had been on the point of telling the old man that he went altogether beyond the mark. He exhorted his mother to write at once to that effect. He would have done it himself personally, only it was a thing that no fellow liked to have to tackle. It made you feel such an ass.

In several of these ingenuous documents he urged upon his mother the necessity of allaying this monstrously false impression in a public manner. She must contradict it in the newspapers, where the mischief had begun. In others he continued to assure her that he did not care a bit about Maud, and never had.

As letter succeeded letter to this disconcerting tenour, Mrs. Broke began to feel that the thing was assuming an air of difficulty. She had been so much in the habit of wielding an absolutely free hand in the management of her family, and everything pertaining to its domestic and foreign affairs, that it was not easy for one of such an autocratic disposition to realize that her beautifully conceived plans for the welfare of her house were in danger of being thwarted by the insubordination of a member of it. From the moment our young gentleman had first delighted and flattered the world by appearing in it he had been humoured in all things. It had not been thought necessary to rear the godlike youth in the Spartan fashion of his sisters. The young prince is the young prince. He must be allowed to work out his splendid destiny, untrammelled by the laws and regulations, the checks and precepts, the vigilant guardians of the young rightly impose on common mortals. But now the possibility was beginning to take shape in the mind of the hero's mother that the latitude conceded to him was likely to prove a mistake. Conceive his sisters behaving in this way!

They would have put their hands in the fire at her behest.

His expressions of distaste had merely amused her at first. She had only allowed them to be part of a boy's bravado and inconsequent assertion of himself. As the bride was not of his own choosing, he must enjoy the pleasure of making it a favour to marry her. That was eminently boylike and natural. But she was hardly prepared to encounter this degree of insubordination in him. He must be aware by now that she had quite made up her mind that he should marry Maud. And in that case his attitude was a little wanton, a little indefensible. She was chary of applying harsh terms to the apple of her eye, the darling of her heart, but his present behaviour was an open flout to her authority. No one knew how it hurt her to make that charge against her ewe lamb; but there was no help for it, an austere bosom must not flinch from making it. And now she was beginning to grow a little afraid. Dating from her last interview with him she had been haunted with the father's capacity for unreason, which at that moment she had so clearly traced in the son. Here was the one dread factor to spoil the whole thing. The scheme might be worked out with mathematical precision and nicety, but the intervention of an hereditary despotism was capable of shattering it to pieces. There are no rules that can guard against that. From the instant that fatal tendency had declared itself in the young hero, the wise lady had not slept quite so peacefully at night.

Her own letters to him had been couched in terms of very great tact. She had been careful to exhibit no spark of resentment for an attitude which she hinted delicately he must know to be egregious. She had soothed him, humoured him, caressed the boyish vanity in him, and neglected no means known to a pen of a pre-eminent suavity of reconciling him to the inevitable. Now and again she appealed tenderly to the maternal relation to which Fate had appointed her, and with beautiful humility besought her offspring to trust to her judgment implicitly, because she was acting for the best, not only as far as he himself was concerned, but as regarded every member of his family. If it were possible, she desired to spare him the excoriation of his pride, incident upon showing him

that what the whole thing really amounted to was a *mariage de convenance*. She had a considerable sense of delicacy. Even if he were too obtuse to see what was so manifestly his duty in this matter, she yet had no wish to wound him by pointing out the slightly coarse nature of it. But even that last resort, a little degrading as it was perhaps, must be adopted if "her precious" did not soon stand forward in a more reasonable light.

To this end she wrote several letters, in which the financial position of his family was clearly indicated, and one at least that bore a veiled reference to Maud's. It was the first time that so crude a course had been taken with the young prince; and his mother felt it keenly. She had a slight sense of shame. It hurt her very much to embarrass her dear one with these sordid details. But it has to be confessed that it hurt her more when her dear one showed no disposition to be embarrassed by them. The letters she received in return betrayed a studiously well-bred avoidance of the unpleasant topic; his passing over of the coarse allusion to the amount of Maud's income was equally studiously well-bred. His mother grew a little piqued by what in another might have incurred the danger of being construed as callous indifference. So acutely did it touch her, that she even permitted herself to go the length of insinuating veiled charges against the hero of the misuse of the hard-wrung money with which he had been furnished constantly, and of extravagance in his way of life. It was a charge that no one had dared to prefer against the young Apollo until that dark hour. He replied that when one was in the Blues one had to do as the Blues did: His brevity was significant.

Such indications of policy underlying the affair were not, however, without their effect. His highness's letters of protest, of complaint, grew less frequent, less disconcertingly frank. Thereupon his august mamma, only too eager to place on this modification of attitude the construction she wished to see upon it, composed a very prettily-worded epistle for his benefit. In it she sought the opportunity of sounding "her precious" as to what he felt to be the most convenient season for the celebration of the nuptial rites—rites monstrous indeed, but were we not all slaves of

the monster Convention! Had her "precious" any feeling in the matter? If so he had but to make it known and she would be only too eager to respect it. But it was becoming essential in the best interests of dear Maud and himself that the matter should be settled without further delay. And as particularly she wished "her precious" to enjoy a perfectly free hand, and as she would be shocked beyond expression if for a moment her angel were to feel that she was unduly exercising the prerogatives peculiar to the material relation, she desired nothing more ardently than that he should consult his own taste in every detail.

To this pleasant document there came no reply. Billy's epistolary powers abruptly gave out. He may have become overpowered suddenly by the sense of his own impotence. His was not the most facile pen that ever ran upon paper. It was paralyzed probably by the art revealed in that last letter of his mother's. It may have brought home to him that he was too inadequately mounted on his Pegasus to compete with credit in such a high-class tournament.

After a week of silence Mrs. Broke wrote again in similar terms. Another week went by, but still no answer arrived to either of these communications. She grew a little more uneasy. This was a form of opposition that she did not like. It was not Billy's habit to be silent. He was such a frank, outspoken creature as a rule. With increasing uneasiness she reflected on the significance of this fact. When in the ardour of controversy his father grew suddenly silent, it was then the real difficulties arose in the handling of him. She was moved to hope that the parallel was not about to be applied to the son.

By the time three weeks had gone by she had grown more than a little afraid. So abrupt a cessation of their intercourse was, to say the least, a trifle ominous. Not for a moment did she think that Billy would prove impossibly obdurate. From a lifelong experience of a character which she had had exceptional facilities for studying, she did not think he had it in him. But, after all, one never knew. Heredity could never be quite left out of the question. In the background was the shadow of the wretched sire, of the sire who was a baffling mixture of

easy tolerance and frank despotism. There were points on which the father could be the most arbitrary man alive. He belonged to a race that were ridiculously simple to deal with up to a certain point; but beyond that point they were liable suddenly to take the bit in their teeth and race away headlong until their so-few wits were dashed out on the rocks of their own folly and arrogance. History had recorded instances.

In the midst of these rather rueful speculations there came a letter from Billy which somewhat sharply resolved her doubts.

CHAPTER XIV

In which a Bomb is deposited right in the Middle of our Harmonious Narrative

IT was a characteristic production, dated "Windsor, Wednesday," and was to inform his mother that the previous day he was married in London.

His good old Mummy was not to be very down on him, as he had made the promise to his new wife some time ago, and she was "the prettiest, the dearest little donah in the world." She was to break the news to his father when he was in a propitious mood: "when he had four aces in his hand, and it was his turn to make the trumps." He hoped his good old Mummy would not judge either of them hastily. She must first see his "dear little kid" before she made up her mind about her. He was quite cheerful personally; she was such a jolly little sort with blue eyes, "a little bit of all right." He was confident that his dear old Mummy had only to see her to fall in love with her. Why, "Cock" Pearson, the most cynical "sub" in the service, who stood groomsman for him, said when he saw her that he would have married her himself, if he, Billy, had not cut in first.

It was well perhaps for our wise and august lady that she could claim to be a hard-bitten woman of the world. An indomitable clearness of head, a certain stoicism of spirit, and a resolute looking of things in the face had grown to be a kind of second nature with her. It was well indeed that she was a strong woman, and a fearless, not accustomed to flinch at trifles. If in lieu of making that communication, Billy had doubled his fist and hit out with

all his force, he could not have dealt his mother a fiercer blow.

It was at the breakfast table that this painful operation had occurred. Maud Wayling was drinking tea in the silence that was her habit, and pecking at the most delicate morsels of bread and butter. The girls were laughing and talking at the top of their voices, and were discussing eagerly the proposed incursions of the field that were shortly to be made; they were also eating bacon and drinking coffee in a very fearless manner. Their father was reading a leading article in the *Standard* newspaper; and was in the act of enunciating, "that one of these days we shall be driven to take decisive action in the Transvaal."

This preoccupation of the members of her household served Mrs. Broke. Any agitation that might have been visible in her passed without remark. Presently, however, Broke, casting the *Standard* aside, inquired if Billy had written again, as some time had passed since his previous letter.

"Not yet," said Mrs. Broke placidly.

At the earliest moment she made good her escape to her morning room. In that security she re-read her son's extraordinary communication with clenched teeth. She re-read it syllable by syllable, until every word was burnt in her brain.

Even then it took some little time before she could convey with any sense of adequacy to her seared intelligence all the facts as there set forth. They had to be insinuated one by one, and pieced together with patient elaboration, before their meaning could be rendered.

If words meant anything her son was married. The significance of such a fact was too wide-reaching to be at once assimilated. But in the first place, and most obviously, it very plainly put an end to this affair of Maud Wayling. In other words, it meant their financial ruin. They had held on tenaciously for several years with no other prospect than Billy's ultimate union with her. Only Mr. Breffit and their bankers knew how compromised they were. Here was an end to that fury, that madness of pinching, scraping, and contriving; of that perpetual seeking of ways and means and putting off of the evil day; of those

attempts to keep up appearances, that their position might appear less hopeless than it really was. None knew but she what they had had to go through. Even her husband and his agent did not know all; but it was over now. It was over; it only remained for the curtain to be rung down on their trivial affair. People would smile when they heard about it, for the space of a week perhaps, at dinner tables and in drawing-rooms; and their significance in their little scheme of things would no longer be.

This was but a fragmentary, an inconsecutive survey of what her aching wits were first able to translate. After a while more data floated up to the surface to be reclaimed out of the vast mass that went to the making of a chaos far down in that bewildered brain. The aspect in which they represented the matter might not be so poignant, so final in one sense, but in another and the one an Englishwoman is rather prone to adopt, equally embarrassing, equally pregnant with disaster. Billy had refrained from a declaration of the social position of the person he had married. It was true that he allowed her to be "the dearest little donah in the world"; that his idyllic fancy had painted her as "a jolly little sort with blue eyes, and tricky little ways," and as a person whom "the most cynical 'sub' in the service" was prepared to marry himself; but even in the midst of these revels of description a cold feeling came over our unfortunate lady that the "little donah" might turn out to be a housemaid.

Of course on the face of things that did not seem possible. After all, the wretched boy was her son, and the son of his father. He might turn obstreperous, and choose to ruin his family rather than submit his will to that of another, but it was scarcely likely that he would wantonly degrade himself and those he held dear. But when she pondered the ways of young men with a tendency to wildness in them; when her thoughts reverted twenty years back to the tragi-comedy of her brother Charles and the actress of the Gaiety Theatre, she was fain to admit that youth would occasionally insist on the indulgence of its foibles.

There was really no saying to whom Billy was married. But at least the chance was remote that his wife was a person of the right sort. It was quite as remote that she

was presentable. Young men about town were only too likely to have an immature taste in these things. Besides, a person of proper instincts and right surroundings would hardly consent to be whirled into matrimony in this surreptitious fashion Her people would insist on knowing something of his.

More probably she had no people. The chances were that she was something outside the pale: a barmaid, or a ballet dancer, or an adventuress of one kind or another, who had deliberately entrapped him.

After an hour spent in deliberation of this bitter kind, Mrs. Broke sent a telegram to her son: "Meet me at Aunt Mary's at Hill Street this afternoon or evening. Shall wait until you come." She also sent a telegram to her sister to say that she had to visit town that morning on important business, and would be in need of luncheon and possibly of a bed. She was essentially a woman of action. By making the effort she could catch the 10.15 train from Cuttisham. Telling Broke briefly that her sister Mary wished to consult her on a matter of importance, and that she might have to stay the night at Hill Street, our redoubtable lady presently set forth on her pilgrimage, and got to the railway station in time.

In the train she had leisure to review the matter that was harrowing her thoughts. Recurring for the tenth time to the fatal letter she became convinced that Billy in his headlong folly and wilfulness had fallen the victim of one who, with a vagueness that was wholly admirable, she termed an adventuress. And assuming that to be the case all was not yet lost. A person of that kind was supposed in the popular imagination to keep in the background a previous husband, who had the trick of issuing from his obscurity at a convenient hour. When this happy possibility came into her mind a lurid picture was thrown before her eyes of a drunken villain springing forward to levy blackmail. The distressed lady had too keen a sense of the ludicrous not to laugh at herself a little; but when we are suffering pain of an acute kind are we not apt to seek relief in the contemplation of weird and drastic remedies?

CHAPTER XV

L'Egoïsme à Deux

HER sister Mary was the wife of a Cabinet Minister, and a leader of society. She was a cheerful worldling, an amiable savage whose odd reputation for philanthropy entitled her to a place in a museum, as would that of a devil fish endowed with the domestic affections. Her mission in life, in the primary sense, seemed to be to open bazaars for charitable purposes; in the secondary, to misrepresent her face and person by the aid of science, and afterwards even more sedulously to misrepresent them by the aid of the illustrated press. Notoriety was her passion; and she went about doing good, attended by footmen and reporters, and the applause of her *claque*. Her appearance, which owed considerably more to art than to nature, was as familiar as that of royalty itself in the shops of Regent Street; and almost every day she published a new scheme in the newspapers, her sworn and bosom friends, for the amelioration of the human race and the animal creation. Now it was a Cottage Hospital for Blind Mice; now a Society for the Cultivation in the Agricultural Labourer of a Distaste for Work and a Fondness for Home-Brewed Ale. She was the perpetual president of that famous and old-established Society for Providing Little Black Children with White Pocket-handkerchiefs. She was the best advertised thing in England with the exception of Mr. Beecham's Soap; and the most hard-worked with the exception of Mr. Pears' Pills.

The strain of keeping in the centre of the public eye had made her prematurely old. It was an open secret that she

used belladonna to brighten her eyes, and cocaine to brighten her intellect. She kept the best table and the worst company in London. Her claim to distinction in her own set was that she was the only woman in it who had been able to retain the husband with whom fate had decorated her. She was known to fame as the Honourable Mrs. Twysden-Cockshott, and her husband the Right Honourable Reginald, the President of the Board of Supererogation, had not put his foot over the threshold of his wife's residence in Hill Street for thirteen years. He divided his time between the House of Commons and his Club. In the popular magazines the satisfaction was his, however, of seeing his name included among those of the fortunate many who owed their success in life to their wives. He could also have added, which he was much too chivalrous to do, that he was qualifying to have his name added to the list of those who owed to their wives their appearance in the Court of Bankruptcy. However, he was no longer responsible for her debts. To the pedestrian world that walked on the pavement, the *clientèle* of the halfpenny morning journal, he owed his own distinction to the fact that he bore the same name as the Honourable Mrs. Twysden-Cockshott. In himself he was an inoffensive man with a considerable effacement of character, and a complete set of ideals bequeathed to him by a maiden aunt of old-fashioned notions, which had proved rather too high for the present state of our progress.

To them at Hill Street came Mrs. Broke in her distress. She only went to poor dear Mary's when it was not convenient that houses sweeter in repute should find her sanctuary. The name of Aunt Mary was never mentioned in the family of Covenden. She belonged to the category of those unfortunates who had "gone under"; and, though she appeared to be particularly alive, not to say kicking, in the subterranean region whither she had gone, she had no existence for her relations in the country, except on the rare occasions that it happened to be convenient she should have. To-day it chanced that she stood in this fortunate position in the eyes of her sister Jane. Mary's was a sort of "pot house," whither she could go when she liked for as long a time as she cared to stay. She could

take whom she liked with her, or make an appointment to meet whom she liked when she got there.

When our redoubtable lady arrived at Hill Street on the stroke of twelve, she was relieved to find that her sister was abroad in the world already and was not expected home to luncheon. She was in no humour to cope with her just then. All the afternoon she sat in the drawing-room waiting for the coming of her son, with an impatience she strove to allay with attempts at reading. A few minutes before five o'clock he was shown in to her.

"Ha, old Mums!" he said with his habitual arrogant cheeriness, "so here we are!"

"Will you have a cup of tea, my precious?"

Her accents were as prodigiously sweet as when he interviewed her last.

"Thanks aw'fly."

Our redoubtable lady watched him a little curiously while he put cream and sugar in his tea, stirred it, and drank it, and noted that his self-possession was as perfect as her own. Then she said—

"What did you mean by that rather stupid letter you sent me this morning? Do you know you rather alarmed me, my pet?"

"Oh, you must buck up, you know," said our young gentleman cheerily. "It was a bit sudden, wasn't it?"

"What was a bit sudden, my precious?"

"That letter."

"Really one can hardly say that. It was three whole weeks since you wrote before."

"Was it so long as that? I didn't think it was so long; how the time does get on, doesn't it?"

"It does, my love," said his mother, opening her blue eyes as wide as she could get them, and beaming upon him steadily.

Billy met them with an imperturbability hardly inferior to her own. He rubbed one hand carefully round his silk hat.

"I think, Mummy, I'll have another cup of tea. The tea is very good."

"Yes, my love, quite good."

Our redoubtable lady continued to look at her son

steadily. The smile was still in her eyes; her voice was calm and beautifully controlled.

"What did you mean, my darling, by that ridiculous assertion that you were married yesterday morning?"

"Ridiculous!" said Billy. "Why ridiculous, Mummy? I don't quite see how the truth *can* be ridiculous."

"Then it is true, my dear one?"

"Of course. I wouldn't rag you, you know."

"And who, pray, is the favoured person?"

There was the half-smile still lurking in her cool blue eyes. There was the same suggestion of a slightly amused suavity with which she had begun the conversation.

"She's a peach," said Billy.

"Who, my love?"

"A peach!"

"I don't think I know the family. I believe there are some people called Mowbray Peach in Warwickshire. But I cannot say that I enjoy the pleasure of their acquaintance."

"I don't mean people at all, you dear old silly," said Billy, laughing heartily. "A peach—a regular picture, y'know. Something sweet and tempting and good to look at."

"And who is this person, my love, who is sweet and tempting and good to look at?"

"My wife," said Billy, taking his hat off one knee and placing it on the other.

"Of course, my love. But who was she before she was your wife?"

Our young gentleman paused. He carefully placed back his hat upon his other knee.

"You must promise, my dear old Mums," he said after reflection, "that if I tell you, you will not be prejudiced and so on. You must promise me that you will not despise her for what she has been."

"I am afraid I cannot enter into any promises of that kind."

"Then I am afraid I cannot tell you."

Mother and son found themselves looking steadily into one another's eyes. It was the first time in their lives that they had been afflicted with a sense of antagonism in their personal relations. It was as sudden as it was un-

expected. In spite of her mantle of stoicism our redoubtable lady could not repress the shudder that went creeping through her veins. She was face to face with a lifelong error. From the day of his birth she had thought she knew all there was to know about Billy. Here now she was confronted with the knowledge of how completely she had deceived herself.

"I promise, my darling," she said meekly.

"Bible oath, you know, old Mums," said Billy with a short laugh. "May-I-cut-my-throat-before-I-die sort of business, don't you know."

"Don't be silly, my pet. I am not in the habit of making promises unless I intend to keep them."

"I would not be too sure of that if I were you, you dear wily old thing. You see, she is my wife now, and—er I may be a little bit sensitive for her, you know. She's mine, don't you know; and if I thought anybody was going to look down on her, or annoy her, or make her feel that she was not as good as they were, they should not see her, Mummy, do you see?"

"You are lucidity itself, my pet. But why, may I ask, should I of all people, your own fond foolish old mother, who has doted on you all your life, be likely to act like this towards the—the—er person you have chosen to marry?"

"I certainly don't know why you should. But there is no saying when one has got you, you wily old woman; and if you don't mind my saying it, you dear old Mummy, you can be very down on people when you like. I've seen you give those poor kid sisters of mine 'gyp,' I can tell you. Oh, I know you! Now this dear little kid of mine is the sweetest little girl in the world and the best; and if even I allowed my dear old Mummy to come along and make her pretty eyes red for her, I should never forgive myself."

"You speak in riddles, my dear one. Why or how I should make the pretty eyes of the—the—er person red, I fail to understand. May I ask, she is not one of those fashionable persons who have a past?"

"Lord no!" said Billy with vehemence. He placed his hat on the carpet out of the way of danger. "What a rotten thing to say, Mummy!"

"It was, my pet," said his mother with beautiful

humility. "I am sure I beg your pardon. But, really, you alarm me so with your hums and haws, that I hardly know how to place her. Come now, my dear one, please reveal to me in just two plain words who this person is I understand you to have married."

"Well, if you must know, she is a little girl out of Perkin & Warbeck's shop in Bond Street, the right-hand side, you know, going out of Piccadilly."

"Thank you, my darling, that is all I wished to know."

There was not a flicker in the placid countenance. Her lips were a little tighter together than was their wont; they were drawn in until her mouth was set in a sharp, straight line. Billy thought he had never seen the hard lights dance quite so quickly and so luminously in her eyes. As he looked at her he could not help thinking that his mother was magnificent.

"Mummy, you are an old brick." The admiration in his face was a part of the frankness which he always allowed himself.

"Thank you, my dear one; you compliment me." Will you take another cup of tea? There is just one left in the pot, if it is not too cold."

"Thank you very much," said Billy; "I think I will."

He picked up his hat again and placed it a little farther out of the way of danger. Mrs. Broke poured out his third cup of tea and presented it to him with a hand that did not shake.

"I suppose, my angel," she said in a low matter-of-fact voice, "you know that you have ruined us all?"

"Oh rot, Mummy!" said our young gentleman cheerily. "You mustn't talk like that, you know. You are not going to take on about it; you are much too sensible an old bird."

"You have ruined us completely and effectually."

"You mustn't talk like that, you know. I took a bold step, but it doesn't mean that, I am sure. She *is* such a jolly little beast."

"Our very existence depended on your marriage with Maud. We are hopelessly compromised in a financial sense, and now in a social one——"

"Suppose you don't say it?" said Billy with a wheedling air.

"Very well, my precious, I will not, as you wish it. But I think it necessary that you should be brought face to face with the state of affairs in which your somewhat unfortunate, not to say hasty, act has involved us."

"Whether it is unfortunate or not, Mummy, remains to be seen, but in any case it was not hasty. I had been thinking of it for some time, although I will admit that when this Maud business came along it may have forced my hand a bit. But now I've taken the plunge, I have sort of made my bed, don't you know, and I've got to lie in it. It may be a bit awkward at first for everybody. I daresay it will, but the dear little kid's mine now, my very own, and I am hers, and—and there you are! She's a little bit of all right. Suits me down to the ground."

"I do not doubt, my love, that all you say is perfectly true; but may I ask why you did not take me at any rate into your confidence before you embarked on a step of such a final nature?"

"I hope, you dear old thing, you did not expect me to be such a jay. Everybody would have made such a fuss. I hate a fuss. Besides, I was obliged to keep it from our crowd. I can breathe easier now I have brought it off. It was a rather ticklish thing, I don't mind telling you."

Our redoubtable lady took in her breath in several sharp little spasms that cut like knives.

"Do you quite think you ought to congratulate yourself, my darling?" she asked a little wearily.

"It is the best day's work I've done. I would not part with my little girl for money."

"Then you are quite insensible, my angel, to the disgrace and ruin of your family?"

"There you go, Mummy," said Billy with pathos, "making a fuss! I wish now I had not told you."

"You must please forgive me, my dear one," said his mother with winning humility.

All the same at that moment, had she held a lethal weapon in her hand she might conceivably have slain her son. Not only was she nearly crushed to earth by the realization of her worst fears—a shop-girl out of Perkin & Warbeck's

shop in Bond Street belonged emphatically to the category of the impossible without even the saving clause of an adventuress with a husband to levy blackmail—but at the same time she was bitterly angry. Our young gentleman's promptings she understood, but his folly was incredible. Trained woman of the world as she was, she recognized that such a detachment of mind was almost inevitable in one born and bred in his class. Even in the present hour of her humiliation and despair, our accomplished lady had not lost her power, said to be somewhat rare in her sex, of impartial reflection. She was aware that Billy, as herself, her husband, her kindred, and the great majority of the members of the privileged and monied classes from whom she had derived her education, were only too apt to play for their own hands entirely. Full many an instance of an almost wolfish self-centredness had she found in her gilded seminary. At times she had been amused by these earnest self-seekers, these *naïf* worshippers at the shrine of self-interest with whom it had been her lot to go to school. There seemed to be some subtle taint in the atmosphere they breathed. It was only to be expected of Billy, who was blood of their blood, who had been imbued with their instincts, nourished on their religion, reared in their *milieu*, that he should be too obsessed by his own immediate point of view to spare a thought to that of persons who had a right to look for some little consideration at his hands. She had the strength to admit, even in that dark hour, that it would have been remarkable had it been otherwise. She would not blame him on that score. The onus lay upon the class into which he had been born. It was his mad infatuation, his desperate folly, for which cheerfully she could have slain him. The wretched fellow did not even make the excuse that he had acted in a moment of impulse or pique. In cold blood, in his right mind, he married a shop-girl, and he boasted of it.

"May I ask, my precious, what you propose to do with your wife, now you have married her?" she said in the voice of modulated calm she had used from the beginning.

"I don't quite know, y' know. I suppose we shall rub along."

"I confess, my darling, that I foresee obstacles rising in your path."

"I was afraid there might be one or two. Have you told my father yet?"

"I have not told him. And to be perfectly candid I hardly dare to tell him. Unless I misjudge your father completely he will make a tragedy of it."

"Yes, he has the reputation of being an eccentric in some things. I think, Mummy, it may be wise to break the news to him a bit."

"I agree with you, my darling. But I must beg you to leave the matter entirely to me. We must not act hastily. Your marriage must not be avowed before the chosen season. We have to think of poor Maud as well as ourselves. I hardly dare to contemplate all the consequences. They are terrible, my pet. I must have time to think the matter out at my leisure. Do not speak of it to any one. Our social credit is at stake. Something is due to us as a family. Your poor sisters may be prejudiced. We may have to submit to derision. I must charge you to absolute caution, to absolute silence, my precious; you must place yourself in my hands unreservedly."

Our young gentleman assented with a slight feeling of relief. He was not so far gone in his infatuation as to have lost entirely his sense of proportion. He foresaw that it would be a bitter pill for his world to swallow. He was prompt to acquiesce therefore in his mother's request. It took the burden of a somewhat irksome duty from his shoulders.

He could not help admiring his mother. She might smile forever and talk in dulcet tones, but she could not wholly deceive him. The mask of a winning stoicism she wore habitually could not avail her. He knew she was badly hit. He had never seen a better piece of acting than he had been treated to in his interview with her that afternoon. It was no mean exhibition of the art, because he guessed that she had been knocked about rather severely by the blow he had dealt her, and now, however composed she might appear, she was really shattered and trembling from the consequences of it, and was bleeding fiercely underneath her laugh.

"I must write to your wife or call upon her, my dear one. Where is she living at present?"

Billy hesitated. He looked at his mother searchingly.

"Honest Injun, Mummy! You can be trusted with her? She's a timid little soul, easily upset."

"Yes, my darling, you can trust me."

"Well—er if you must know the address—er is 17, Cromwell Villas, Hampden Road, London, N."

"Write it down, my love."

"Here is a business card with it printed on it. She lives with an aunt who is a dressmaker or something of that sort."

Billy took out his cigarette-case, and selecting from it a square piece of cardboard, not particularly clean, with some inferior printing in a large type upon it, gave it to his mother. She accepted it with the same outward composure, although it revolted her a little as her fingers touched it.

Sworn to perfect secrecy, Billy presently left his mother to catch his train to Windsor. Mrs. Broke having decided to remain in town that night, sent a telegram to Covenden and surrendered herself to her aching thoughts. She was a woman of courage, but as she sat alone in that huge drawing-room lit with dim lamps, with the loneliness and the silence emphasizing the frightened beatings of her heart, she had that dull sense of calamity which afflicts the railway passenger, who having gone to sleep in the night mail, awakes with a shock to find himself buried in a void of *débris* and darkness and the cold wind freezing the sweat upon his face. She had now passed from the first stage of semi-consciousness of this poor traveller to one of a slowly-maturing sensibility: when the questions, "Where am I? What has happened to me?" have given place to "I wonder if I am mortally hurt; I hope there is nothing internal; I suppose this wet stuff trickling into my eyes must be blood!" Mrs. Broke now knew the nature of her accident; she was occupied in trying to find out just what her injuries were.

This she could not do. She knew positively that she was severely mauled; she felt as though she were going to die; but her predicament was so strange, so terrible

that she could not say what the immediate future had in store. Her fine scheme for the restoration of their fortunes had been shattered to pieces in the very moment of its culmination. She had been congratulated; her wisdom and her cleverness had been extolled; she had been the object of envy; but as she had raised the cup of success to her lips it had been wantonly dashed to the ground by the one the nearest, the dearest to her in the world.

Even that act she might have forgiven had it been one of impulse; there is apparently no act too gross or too insane to be unable to incur the pardon of the human mother. But it had proved to be a calculated blow in which her son exulted. This woman he had married, this nameless person whose vocation it was to serve behind the counter of a shop, he proposed to support unrelentingly, and vindicated his behaviour by assuring her that this creature alone had the power to make an appeal to his nature.

It was singular that young men should be subject to hallucinations such as these. Bitterly she recalled the parallel case of her brother Charles. On that occasion his friends became acquainted in time of his infatuation, and were able to rescue him from the hands of the vulgar and unscrupulous woman who had hypnotized him with her animal beauty. The poor mother was convinced that precisely the same thing had happened to her boy, only in his case there was the important reservation that the gods had not thought fit to intervene. As usual they were on the side of the big battalions. Charles's family was strong enough even to withstand the social ruin of its eldest son. Billy's was not. Be sure the malicious gods had taken those facts into their consideration!

She had made up her mind already that the young person whose dwelling-place was Cromwell Villas, Hampden Road, London, N., was an underbred designing little minx, in the same way that Miss Maisie Malone had proved to be a flashy and rather fat vulgarian. Howbeit she would go and see for herself. Maimed as she was she had still enough spirit left to be faintly amused at Billy's solicitude for such an artful little wretch. But the scales

had not yet dropped from the eyes of the unhappy fellow. His anxiety for the fine feelings of "the dearest little donah in the world" would have been perfect comedy, however, from the stalls of the theatre. Real life, it seemed, was still our only dramatist. She laughed a sorry note in honour of the *mot*. Still she would go and see for herself. For she still clung with a rather frantic tenacity to her last straw, an impalpable vague ridiculous straw, but still a straw. The hope was still faint in her that the creature might turn out to be the adventuress with the husband in the background, although that belonged rather to the transpontine stage. Real life, however, had been known on occasion to turn its hand to melodrama. But her hopes in that direction had been weakened already. A shop girl out of Bond Street is hardly the material out of which to cut your true adventuress. Doubtless she would prove to be a creature of a hopeless propriety. Doubtless she was; even your very young men are content with a *liaison* with the other kind; after all it is the virtue of the lower classes that provokes the unsophisticated to admit them into the holy temple of matrimony. Without their virtue they had to be content with less. Hence their proverb, Honesty is the Best Policy.

Still she would go and see her. She was under a promise not to be harsh with her, not to make her pretty eyes red. Yes, she supposed she had made some kind of a promise; she supposed, therefore, that she would have to keep some kind of a curb upon herself—although it was not easy to hurt the feelings of that class. She was led to believe there was only one word in the range of the language that could touch them, and that was never heard on the lips of a virtuous woman. Still she was not sure that she might not know how to make her wince a little. She had given her somewhat loose and indefinite promise to Billy; but that young man was not to suppose in his strange ignorance of human nature that if one woman inflicts an injury upon another woman, the victim is lightly to be dissuaded from retaliation.

Fortunately the musings of the galled and suffering lady were interrupted at this point. Her sister Mary

flounced into the room, an emanation of rustles and odours. She came in marvellously spick and span, and quite undaunted in energy, although during the day she had opened three bazaars in outlying parts of the vast metropolis, presided at the half-yearly administration of the Fund for Providing Distressed Society Women with Tiaras, and had presently to go out to dine with a duke at the *Carlton Hotel*. Her appearance suggested that of an actress of an inferior rank, who covers the retreat of her pristine freshness with enamel and rose pink.

"Hullo, my sister," she shouted at the top of a voice that was not altogether pleasant. "You here! Two cups. Aha, a man to tea! Fie upon you, you skittish matron. Glad I was out. Sorry I came back. Hope I did not disturb you. Are these the legs of a man I see before me protruding from under the sofa? No; only my romantic fancy. I wonder, sister, if I ever shall get rid of my eternal youth!"

"I think, my dear, you may hope in time sufficiently to conceal it," said Mrs. Broke, purring with placidity.

"Ha! you darling old cat, you keep your claws as sharp as ever. What's your game now? Money, sordid humiliating pelf; or has Juno come to ask Minerva, 'What Shall We Do With Our Daughters?' Were you the 'Materfamilias' who started the correspondence in the *Daily Telegraph?*"

"No, my dear, but I think if I chose I could furnish the name of the 'Constant Reader' who started the one before, 'What Shall We Do With Our Husbands?'"

"It is no good, sister, I shall not compete. You are too quick. When is Billy going to be spliced?"

"Nothing is settled yet."

"High time isn't it? The thing has been lagging superfluous for at least a month. I saw the hero at the Troc. the other night after the play. He was not aggressively sober. A gilt mug laid me five to four in ponies that he would be another Charles. I took him on the nail; they don't know the mamma of *ce preux chevalier*, do they? How much is the Fair Persian worth—three millions or two? A nice domesticated creature with no expensive tastes, I understand. Our hero, straight out of

Ouida though he be, will never be able to spend all that on polo ponies. How *will* he be able to dispose of it? Can you tell me, my sister? I suppose numerous charities will benefit."

"I refer you to Reginald, my dear. He sits at the feet of the Chancellor of the Exchequer. I do not pretend to a knowledge of finance."

"Ha, there you go again! I don't know when I have known your claws so sharp, you funny old thing. Still it was a bit below the belt. But really, darling, I must hit somebody. I am in a frightful temper."

"Quarter day?"

"Not at all."

"The horrid Mr. Samuel Moses refuses to defer his bill of sale?"

"How did you guess?"

"Intuition, my dear—the feminine prerogative."

"Well, you are right off it. No, the fact is I have been having a lot of bad luck lately."

"Baccarat?"

"Bookies. I have forsaken the sport of princes for the sport of kings. I don't know when I have been so angry. I had the dead straight from Harry to back Parable for the Nash at 100 to 8. I wired to my bookie, but got a bit mixed in the code. Parable rolled home allright in the commonest, but Bookie repudiates, and refuses point blank to tip up the spondulicks. What would you do, darling? You have a reputation for wisdom."

"I confess, my dear, that your conversation is too technical to be followed except by the expert. You out-Charles our poor dear Charles. Do I understand you to refer to the Turf?"

"Alas, my sister, I see you are in no mood to humour my frailties. And I am *so* cross. I mentioned it to old Justice Sharp last night. He said that if I went to law, and the judge happened to be unusually young or unusually senile, and I wore my new thing of Raquin's, a pork pie shape, trimmed with green mousseline de soie, out of which issue a pair of crushed-strawberry-coloured turtle doves rampant, from a pale yellow ground slightly erased, which he had already had occasion to admire, I

might get my case, always providing that the judge was not a naturalist. In that event, he said, I should be committed for contempt and get six months."

"When does Reginald introduce his bill, my dear, for the Suppression of Judicial Humour?"

"How I wish, my sister, that you would keep King Charles's head out of your conversation! But I don't want to drag Bookie to a court of law; you are acquainted, darling, with my horror of publicity. Besides, if I did, it's a thousand to five, to lay Charles's favourite odds, that the Religious Rumtefoozleum and the Nonconformist What-you-call-it would not let me open any more bazaars. Really lonely women in the vast metropolis cannot be too careful. Oh, by the way, I must thank you so much for your tip about Mars and Jupiter Railways that you had from that Salmon man, your neighbour. So thoughtful of you. That fish is quite an original. I hear he is absolutely straight. Oh, and tell me, my sister, what is this about our dear old Mun, our dear stiff-backed, blue-blooded, simple-minded, penny-noveletteish feudal baron about to become a guinea pig! When I saw his name in the prospectus in the *Times* this morning, with only two of his initials wrong, I thought I should have perished. A sordid age, my dear. E. W. A. C. B. Broke, Esq., J.P., D.L., Covenden, Parkshire, gentleman. A sordid age. I suppose all his ancestors have turned in their tombs in Covenden church already. I suppose the Broke ghost is walking in the east wing, *à la* that friend of my youth, dear Mrs. Henry Wood. It makes one shudder, yet I protest there is a touch of the sublime. Poor dear old Mun; and they say this is not an age of heroes! King Romance has come again indeed. I have sent that prospectus to be framed. It marks an epoch. The old order not only changes, it wipes itself out. And so fell Broke of Covenden and with him the race of England's gentlemen!

"How is our dear old Charley one? I haven't seen him for an age. Please give him my love, and tell him that the last keg of whisky he sent poisoned the housekeeper's cat. Tell him Mountain Mist's the tipple. Ask him to mention my name, and to give an order to Johnson,

Boswell and Scott, Carlyle Yard, Bermondsey. You had better not tell him, though my sister, that I have a twenty-five per cent. commission on every order that I place, or he will be demanding discount. And how are the 'little chestnut fillies'? Are they as fond of bacon, and as lean and as leggy, and as nosey and as elbowy, and as haughty and as inane, and as bucolic and as aristocratic, and as utterly impossible as ever? And how is our dear authoress? I haven't read her latest work as yet, but I bought one at the Stores and presented it to my latest royal pal, His Serene Highness the Hereditary Grand Duke of Hochanseltzer. I gave it to him for its moral teaching. He is a wonderfully susceptible young man. He is tickled to death by the moral tone. He has quite given up his old habit of making *sans atout* on the jack of diamonds and the queen of hearts. He says it is superb; it is magnificent; it is ze expression of a spirit. I told him that there was not much moral tone to speak of in our family; but what there was we liked the world to know about. When you see the dear authoress give her, in my name, a kiss of sisterly affection upon the white enamel of her intellectual brows. But I chatter, darling, and I must really go and dress. I fear you will have to dine alone. Reginald, of course, is much too busy propping up the Empire to come away as far as Hill Street. You see if he once removed his shoulders from beneath the British Constitution down would fall the whole massive structure and plunge millions into death and ruin, *vide* his speech in the House on Tuesday. It is rather a responsibility for the poor dear, isn't it? I do hope his dear health will not break down beneath the strain. Fancy having to support it alone and unaided on his own dear shoulders, day after day, year after year. It is like the solar system; the imagination reels. Samson, Hercules and Reginald will be the three strong men of history, with long odds on Reginald. The dear devoted fellow, to think that this pillar of the Government has not left the post of duty for thirteen years even to come and see his wife! But so long, my sister. I must go really. I mustn't keep Harry waiting. He is too expensive. I pay him so much an hour to take me about, like my cook pays her guardsman."

The volatile lady, who had not ceased in her monologue from the time she arrived to the time she departed, ultimately did so after a sojourn of half an hour, to the great relief of poor Mrs. Broke.

"Cocaine," murmured our unfortunate lady, as the door closed upon her. "If poor Mary is not soon immured in an asylum I fear she will lower the standard of the national sanity. Poor dear Charles is bad enough; but cocaine is much more deadly than whiskey."

CHAPTER XVI

The Nobleman out of the Novelette

NO. 17, Cromwell Villas, Hampden Road, N., had one of those exteriors that brings home to the passer-by the bleak mockery of life. There was nothing to recommend it from without. There was nothing to suggest why any human creature should inhabit it, unless by force of need. It was common, it was ugly, it was unclean; it was situated in the heart of a neighbourhood that had not even the spirit to make an attempt at pretending to be what it was not. There was nothing in or about it to relieve its repulsiveness. Nothing could put a gloss on the squalor by which it was surrounded, the hopelessness by which it was debased; soap and water and the parish vestry had given up the attempt. It is a sardonic fancy in the architect of these dwellings to enclose a piece of earth a few square inches in diameter in the front of each. What purpose such an enclosure serves it is hard to tell, unless it is to enable each house to stand in its own grounds. Or it may be a concession to our deep-rooted English passion for possession. The tenant may feel that the grimy patch is his own piece of arable, a square yard of territory off which he can order the policeman himself, should he presume to trespass. May he not even erect a notice to that tenour? The indulgence may be his of "Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted," so dear to the British landowner.

Again, the architect may be one of a sombre imagination, a symbolist who seeks to strike the analogy between these patches of sterility and the neighbourhood in which they are laid. Never are they green or fruitful. Choked with

grime and refuse, they stand congealed and foul and perennially bare. Nothing fresh, nothing beautiful, nothing reasonably fair can hope there to raise its head. The dog leaves his bone there; the slatternly servant-girl, the "slavey" of the true genus, bestrews it with ashes and herring bones, and the leaves of decomposing cabbages.

The sun, a compassionate agent in other districts, refuses to extend its beneficence to Hampden Road, London, N. The less light by which there is to view its details, the less unhappy does it appear. Look where you chose, and poverty, squalor, sullenness and mean misery would confront you. If by a remote chance the eye was arrested by a faint attempt to achieve something a little worthier in the shape of a whitened doorstep, an unbroken knocker, an uncracked window, a pair of curtains without a remarkable number of holes, or a pair bearing the suggestion of having been washed within the memory of a man, it was revolted by the nude relief in which it threw adjacent objects. It was not for individual effort to enhance or alleviate; it was overwhelmed by the spirit of environment. Where is the hope for those who dwell in these vast unexplored areas, dark and quick with every form of life and every form of foulness, where every second house is a brothel, and every third a gin shop, where disease and want herd like flies in dung, and seek by their sombre orgies to evoke forgetfulness?

No. 17, Cromwell Villas, was in the middle of a row of twenty similar tenements. Conceivably it might have bewildered the observing passer-by with its claims to distinction. It bore upon the face of it quite a melancholy number of attempts to achieve the respectable. Its doorstep, its front parlour window, and its curtains came as near to cleanliness as the exigencies of a street permitted in which the sun itself was a ball of grime. There was also a bundle of flowers in a china cup standing in the window. In that locality they looked as phenomenal as a chip of blue sky protruding through a London fog. There was the inevitable card in the window, to be sure, but instead of bearing the legend "Apartments," it said, "Miss Sparrow, dressmaker."

Two women were seated behind this card on a bitterly

cold morning in the middle of April. One was old, with grey hair almost white and very sparse. By careful arrangement it was made the most of. She herself was very meagre; she also had a far-away air of being made the most of. She was thin, flat, and narrow, with something a little formal in her demeanour, as one whose self-consciousness is not even yet merged in her years. Her black dress was old and primitive, but evidences were not wanting in it of a desire for propriety. Her face was peaked and shrivelled like a piece of yellow parchment. It was a commonplace, a wholly commonplace face, transfigured with a certain harshness, the outward and visible sign of a lifelong struggle with its destiny.

If the wearer of the face had ever been able to hold it up in the grim battle, it might have been less unsatisfactory to look upon. If a breath of honest sunshine, of pure air, had been allowed to touch it now and then; had the dress been reasonably new, or even had it had a reasonable number of threads in it; had there been some slight feminine accessories to soften the bareness of the throat; if the hourly struggle for a loaf of bread and two ounces of tea, a roof and a bag of coals could have been put by for a single week; if the wearer of the face could have been made to understand that life itself did not wholly depend on those half-blind and hopeless eyes, on those coarse and weary fingers, on those stiff and attenuated limbs, on the eternal plying of needles and scissors from the first thread of light in the morning to the last gutter of the candle at night, her portrait, debased and unprepossessing as it is, yet might not have looked quite so egregious in our gallery of the fair, the exalted, the wise, the kindly, the witty, and the well bred.

The other woman was much younger: a girl. Like the flowers in the cracked cup in the window, she had the air of being a phenomenon in Hampden Road. Even in the grim purlieus of mid-London it seems that the supernatural occurs more frequently than you would think. She also was thin and slight; it might have been the thinness that does not get enough to eat; she also was dressed in severe black raiment, but distinctly less primitive in style and texture than that of the elder woman, for about every inch

of her was the ineffable neatness of the London shop-girl.

She may have been beautiful or she may not, but her face was of a very delicate, poignant, arresting kind. And in any case she was sufficiently picturesque. It was the glamour of youth that depends on vivid colouring, the sheen of the hair, the pursed cherry-ripe look of the lips, the fresh clean look of the skin, the extreme candour of the eyes, that may even grow up in Cromwell Villas, but does not stay there long. She could have sat for the picture of Youth; and all who were not insensible to perfect simplicity and perfect innocence would have said she was as good to look at as a Greuze. A year hence might prove another matter; but as yet she was absolutely fair. The canker of toil, endless and unremitting, had yet to defile her. The hourly struggle against starvation, that haunting monster, had yet to sully her radiance with the degradation of its claws.

The two women were talking excitedly, but at the same time both unceasingly plied needle, scissors, and thread. They were conversing this morning with something of the feverish energy with which they toiled. For a week past they had been living in the realm of faery. A touch of very strange but very real romance had been insinuated into the lives of aunt and niece—lives which since each had been endowed therewith had never varied in monotony. They were trying now to trace clearly the course of recent events, and to realize exactly what they implied. At present, however, excited, incredulous, astonished as they were, they were too bewildered by them to be able so to do. No matter how hard they rubbed their eyes they could not convince themselves that they were really awake. Three tangible evidences had they to go upon, however. Alice had a wedding ring on her finger, a five pound note in her purse, and she had given up her situation.

Aunt and niece were in a condition of deliciously vague excitement, like that of a child when it hears a knock upon the nursery door, and is informed that it is a bear. They were rather too frightened to be wholly happy, yet they were much too happy to be really frightened. The thing itself was most exquisite matter of fact, yet it out-*Family-*

Heralded the *Family Herald.* To them of all people, to them in their mundane sphere, to them in the unvarying monotony of their daily lives, when the only adventures they had in the course of a year were the weekly ones with the landlord, King Romance had stepped directly out of his novelette, and had come ruffling it with a carol on his lips and a most beautiful insolent swagger, to No. 17, Cromwell Villas, Hampden Road.

How he had chosen to hit on that exact number was altogether beyond them. Why had he not gone to No. 15 or No. 19, both very nice and worthy people; whatever had put it into his head to come *there?* If he had not been the real King Romance of which they had read, if he had been some plausible impostor masquerading in a court uniform for base and ulterior purposes, they could have understood it. Their anxiety and incredulity would not have been so extreme. Impostors are supposed to be common; but there is only one real King. And why that one authentic dazzling young monarch should have hit on No. 17 exactly, no more nor no less, but just that number, must remain a mystery and one of the most wonderful things ever known.

"You see, my dear," said the aunt, picking the stitches out of a bodice while her dim eyes bent lower and lower to her work; "you see, my dear, it would not put me about so if he was not a perfect gentleman. Do what you will you can't help noticing that."

"No, auntie, you can't," said her niece with a beating heart.

She was heating an iron at the fire.

"It is just that which has upset me so," said the aunt. "When he knocked at the door, and I went to open it just as I am now, with all these bits on my dress; and there he was standing on the doorstep that I hadn't had time to clean, and he says 'Miss Sparrow,' you could have knocked me down with a feather. Of course, my dear, you had said all along he was a perfect gentleman; and you will remember that I said that if that was so you must be all the more careful, because the more perfect the gentleman the less a young girl ought to put her trust in him. The likes of them are not in the habit of con-

descending to the likes of us unless they are going to get something by it. Those were my very words. And those are my words still."

"But I am married, auntie, now," said the girl.

"You are, my dear, and that is just what makes everything so unreal. If he were not just what he is, it would be more natural. Even when you came home and spoke about him first I never thought he was one of that sort. Why he might have been a young earl the way he stood there with his hat off and talked so grand and simple and so mannerly. I never saw any one look the part so much as he does; and besides if you never saw him at all, you would know what he was if only you heard his beautiful voice. He can't help being a gentleman. It is born in him just as it is born in that cat to walk stately. It is not a diamond pin and a gold watch chain with him. You can't even bring your mind to such things when he is talking to you. You don't know whether he wears them or not, and, my dear, you don't care. I could not tell you how he was dressed, although I am sure his shirt and his collar must have been got up at one of those patent steam laundries. You could not possibly get them up at home as well as that."

"No, auntie, dear, I don't suppose you could," said her niece, smiling gravely.

"Do you know, my dear," continued the older woman a little ecstatically, "he made me think of the Duke of Grandchester that the Lady Gwendolen married in that beautiful story in the *Family Herald Supplement*. Do you remember that it said, 'the Duke had the grand manner peculiar to dukes'? Well, my dear, that is what Mr. Broke made me think of. I am sure the author must have copied him when he wrote that. I have never known before just what the 'grand manner' meant; but I think I do now. And that is why I am so afraid. I never slept at all last night for thinking of you. Everything seems so unnatural when you come to think about it as you lie in bed. It seems too much like a story; but I have read it somewhere that truth *is* stranger than fiction. And so it is, my dear, so it is, if all that has happened to us is actually true! But nobody can deny that it *was* a

real church at which you were married; I am sure it was a real clergyman of the Church of England, and he had *such* a kind face; and with my own eyes I saw you and Mr. Broke sign your names in the marriage register."

"Yes, yes, auntie, you did," said her niece eagerly. "It must all be perfectly real, although you can't get over the feeling that it is just like a fairy tale. Perhaps I am Cinderella with a fairy godmother that I do not know about. Fairy godmothers always make these things happen, don't they? In any case here is the wedding ring, auntie, and if you hold the five pound note up to the light, you can see the watermark in it."

The girl laughed nervously, but joyfully. She, too, was afraid; but her fear was of a kind that gave a keener savour to her delirious happiness. After all it was no more than a touch of sharpness that made it linger on the tongue. Come what might, no one could gainsay that they belonged to one another, that they were man and wife. No one could deny the sacred, the inviolable tie that bound them together; nothing could rob her of the exquisite emotion of pride, of gratitude, of joy, that the contemplation of the fact had given.

"He says he will introduce you to what he calls 'his people' as soon as he can," said the aunt. "And I am not sure, dearie, that I shall not be a little easier in my mind when he has done that. He did not say much about them, but I could tell that they were very grand folks, and proud too. But, of course, they must be, or he would not belong to them. How I should like to see his mother! What a beautiful and kind and grand lady she must be! I am sure his people, whoever they are, must be just like him. They must all be perfect ladies and gentlemen, and all very handsome and mannerly. He must have had a wonderful mother; a real countess or a duchess, or perhaps, even a marchioness. For there is nothing shoddy or imitation about him, is there? You can see what in others you might think to be airs come quite natural to him. And so simple as he is with it all. He must know all those grand people in the West End, but do you know, my dear, I never heard him mention them once. I wish that Mrs. West at No. 23

could see him; she never opens her mouth but out comes her uncle the vestryman. He does not make the least parade of his wealth or his gentility. When you get over the first shock of finding that you are talking to him, it is just as easy as it is to speak to the milkman. Why, he sat down at this very table and took a cup of tea. And would you believe, my dear, that when it came to putting sugar in it, he put in two lumps with his fingers quite simply and naturally. I do wish that Mrs. West could have seen him."

Billy's wife laughed joyfully again. Her simple old aunt had been singing his praises in this childlike manner for two days. There was no keeping her from the delicious topic, nor did she seek, for it was poetry and music to them both. To every word uttered by her aunt she could subscribe. She was too much at the mercy, however, of the wild riot of happiness that was in her blood, that every now and then sent it racing and tingling to her temples, and singing in her excited brain, to be able to translate her own feelings into language. Also perchance she deferred to the instinct of reticence, for it hardly became one who was officially his wife to lay bare her thoughts in these unguarded terms. All the same no praise of him was too extravagant for her to hear; no eulogium could be passed upon him that he did not merit. His voice, his air, his noble person were things all equally radiant, all equally lovely and fair. She had seen a good deal more of the exterior life than her aunt, that childlike old creature who had passed her years of unremitting toil in a world of her own, a world peopled with the phantom figures of her fancy, coloured with her own ideals of conduct, and the glamour that haunts the fastnesses of faery, yet, at the same time, subject to the peculiar conventions of her own trite point of view. Even a child cannot spend eighteen months in a shop in Bond Street without being brought to view the life by which she is oppressed with slightly less distorted eyes.

She had been bred in that exotic atmosphere of the fancy in which all her life her aunt had lived. But even she could not touch shoulders with reality in a West End shop without having some of the sense of wonder rubbed

off her that the rich people of those parts inspired in the elder woman. Her worship of Billy therefore was a trifle more educated. She had not quite the same grotesque awe for the signs manual of gentility as had that doting old creature who, condemned from her birth to squalor, privation, and toil, had yet all the instincts, the little ineffable refinements of a nature's gentlewoman lurking in the stagnant recesses of her heart. However, for the girl to find in a lover such rare, such surprising attributes, was enough to provoke her reverence and her gratitude. The superficial polish of her husband dazzled her as completely as the shining qualities of his mind and heart as depicted in the glowing tones of her maiden fancy. Those who prostrate themselves before the gods may worship their immortality, but it is not to be supposed that they are not also held in thrall by their splendid bearing and demeanour.

The older woman, deep down in her heart, might tremble for the permanence of this wonderful palace of faery that had been raised in a night. It was too much like a dream of a transcendent loveliness which, even while we sleep, we know must vanish as if it had never been. But transient as she felt it must be—surely it was much too beautiful to endure—she was yet able in a measure to yield to its delights.

She had reared her orphan niece in the teeth of circumstance. She had watched her grow into a flower in whose beauty she had learned to take an inordinate pride. And of late when at the end of her day's labour she had turned for an hour to her story papers that, before she went to bed, she might banish the too-insistent present, and replace it with the realm of faery, she had been led to meditate a little wildly, a little wistfully, upon the beauty of the child. If only some rich man, some gentleman in real life could be brought to see her, might he not fall in love with her! In her weekly story paper the thing was occurring constantly. Oh, if it could occur to Alice! Surely no heroine in the novelettes was more beautiful than she. The old woman believed there was not her equal in loveliness in all the world. Besides, it was coming to seem so necessary that she should be rescued from the daily

round of her arduous toil. It had begun to grow more and more apparent to Miss Sparrow that the life of a girl in a London shop was too severe for her fragile niece. The long hours, the close confinement, and the strain of having to stand behind a counter from eight o'clock in the morning till eight o'clock at night was beginning to tell upon her. You had only to glance at her to feel that nature had not planned her for hardship. Her parents before her had been fragile too. Neither of them from the first had been destined for long days, but it was certain that labour and poverty had curtailed their lives.

Therefore when the prince out of the fairy book, the nobleman out of the novelette, came and slipped a wedding ring on the finger of her niece, the imaginative old lady, fearful as she was of what the future might have in store, yet had a heart as overflowing as that of Alice herself. Even now she paused an instant in her work, and raised her half-blind eyes to peer into the exquisite face.

"I will say this, my lamb," she said, and she did not try to dissemble the far-away echo of triumph in her voice, "Mr. Broke may be the perfect gentleman, as of course he is, but he is not a bit too good for you. He is not an inch better than you deserve. And you will not disgrace him. He may have good friends, but you will be able to take your place amongst them. They may be duchesses and earls, but that will make no difference. Your private character will be fit to stand at the side of theirs. I have brought you up carefully; I was able to let you attend half days at school until you had turned fourteen; you have formed no low companionships; you have never stayed out late in the evening; you have gone to chapel once every Sunday; you have always been a good and obedient girl in everything; and although I am your auntie and say it, who ought not, when I compare your looks with those of the ladies with handles to their names, whose pictures are in the illustrated paper the grocer wraps the tea in, I will defy anybody to deny that you are more beautiful, a hundred times more beautiful, than they are."

"Hush, auntie, dear," said the child with a soft laugh. "Whatever would people say if they heard you!"

"I don't care," said the old woman vain-gloriously, "it

is the truth. Nobody ought to be ashamed of the truth. I will say again that I think Mr. Broke is a very lucky young gentleman. I know I am your auntie; but if you were not my niece at all, and I had had nothing to do with your up-bringing, I should say the same. If you were the niece of that Mrs. West it would not make me say different."

It was at this moment that the quiet street was invaded by alien sounds. There was a remarkable rattle of horses' feet, but unaccompanied by the noise of wheels. The place enjoyed an immunity from traffic as a rule; and there was something that appeared to sound special and peculiar about this oncoming vehicle, if vehicle it was, that put it out of the category of a tradesman's cart. Curiosity, which in that sex no labour is too earnest to overcome, urged the girl to peer out of the window.

"Oh, look, look, auntie!" she cried. "A carriage and pair."

Perchance it was an apparition that marked an epoch in the history of Hampden Road. Miss Sparrow could not recall an instance of such an equipage being seen in it before. Had the Queen been in the act of passing her window, the old woman could not have discarded her work more vehemently or more swiftly have adjusted her spectacles.

"How splendid!" she said. "And the wheels don't make a bit of noise; and how pretty those bells sound when they tinkle. And what stately men those two are sitting in the front, although they do look funny with those fur capes on, and those ornaments in their hats. They must be servants, I suppose, but I am sure they are very high class. I wonder where they can be going. Oh, my dearie, what if they should stop at Mrs. West's!"

"It is only passing through auntie, dear," said the niece, smiling a little at the old woman's enthusiasm. She was quite familiar with these vehicles; although before she went to the shop in Bond Street they would have cast the same sort of spell upon her.

"Why, it is stopping," cried the old lady excitedly. "Oh, Alice, it is going to stop at Mrs. West's!"

Suddenly the child at her elbow began to tremble

violently. An idea had gone through her that was making her gasp.

"It—it is—going to stop here!"

The old woman began to tremble also at the horror of the suggestion.

"Never!" she gasped, with a scared face.

But outside in the street the awful fact confronted them. After a little irresolution on the part of the coachman, during which period the footman scanned the dingy numbers of the doors on both sides of the street, the superb equipage drew up exactly in front of the magic number 17. That unassuming number had, indeed, come of late to have a particular significance in the world of faery.

"Oh, my dear," said the aunt in a flash of terrified inspiration, "it is one of Mr. Broke's grand friends come to call upon you. Whatever shall we do!"

The mind of the unhappy young wife had travelled to that conclusion a full half minute ago. For an instant the old woman and the young looked in an agony of anxiousness into the white faces of one another. That wretched little room was no place in which to receive grand people. Too acutely were they conscious of the mean figures it and its occupants must present to the merciless eyes of grand people who came in a carriage and pair. But the thought uppermost in their minds, the most numbing and paralysing thought, was the fear that possessed them of disgracing Mr. Broke. It did not much matter what grand folks thought about people as poor and insignificant as they were; but now that Alice was actually the wife of Mr. Broke it might do him a grievous injury with his grand friends if she were to be discovered in such circumstances.

"Oh, auntie!" said the girl, "will you go to the door, and—and please say I am not at home."

"No, child," said the aunt, with a suspicion of primness striking through her agitation, "I cannot say that. It would be an untruth."

"Oh, but, auntie, you must, please. It is for the sake of—of my husband! His friends must not come into a room like this."

"No, no, child, I will not tell a falsehood."

"Oh, but auntie, it is—it is not really a falsehood at all. It only means that—that I cannot see them."

During this rather wild dialogue between the two distressed creatures, a lady with a very red face and a very fine hat and a wonderful fur cloak, had been seen to descend from the carriage with a little aid from the footman and a good deal from her dignity. With an electrical thrill in their pulses they had heard her come up the steps and thump commandingly upon the broken knocker.

"Please, auntie, you must."

"No, child."

A second commanding thump upon the decrepit knocker.

"Oh, what can I do? She must not see me. But perhaps it is his mother. Perhaps she will not mind. I will go, auntie," she added with the swiftness of resolution.

"No, no, child," said her aunt. "It is more proper that I should answer the door. Stay here, dearie, and brush the bits of cloth off your dress, and take the needle out of your sleeve, and find the *Family Herald*, and try to look as if you have been reading."

In the middle of these hoarsely spoken injunctions the door received a third thump from the knocker, more commanding than any. Miss Sparrow ran in great trepidation to reply to it.

CHAPTER XVII

An Excursion into Sentiment

IN less than a minute the small and mean room had been invaded by a Presence. The lady who had come in the carriage and pair was, in the eyes of Miss Sparrow, fitted in every way to be a friend of Mr. Broke's. Indeed the voice of this wonderful person was as remarkable as his. If she had come on foot, and without a fur coat, as soon as she began to speak you would have known her to be a lady, born and bred. And she too had the particular magic that belonged to Mr. Broke, for no sooner did she begin to talk to you than the overwhelming sense of her grandeur left you. By some occult means the fear of her went out of you; and you discovered yourself to be talking to her with far less trepidation than seemed possible before you had spoken to her.

"You have a niece," the lady had said, before Miss Sparrow had been able to make an attempt to say anything. "May I see her?"

"Yes, ma'am," Miss Sparrow had murmured in reply in a perfectly inaudible tone, and making a deep curtsey that seemed to have dropped straight out of the Georgian period.

When the great lady came into the little room, four yards by five, she said: "Your room is delightfully snug and cosy. May I take off my coat?"

To herself she said: "One wonders why the lower classes have such a deep-rooted horror of ventilation. One wonders how they can exist at all in such an atmosphere."

Miss Sparrow begged to be allowed to help the lady to take off her coat; and while she was engaged in so doing, her fingers, which had passed a lifetime in the handling of inferior materials, were thrilled by the feel of the soft fur and the finest cloth that money could buy. A dress-maker as well as a poet may have a sense of artistry.

The old woman then made haste to provide the great lady with the best chair the room could boast: a chair covered with horse-hair. Seated upon this Billy's mother was able, at her leisure, but not without some little personal inconvenience, to survey the person whom Billy had married. She regarded her with a frank scrutiny, a little softened by her smile.

"I think you know my son," she said. "My name is Broke."

The child lifted her eyes to her nervously, and blushed a bright red colour.

"I understood my son to say that you were married to him on Tuesday."

"Yes," said Alice, timidly.

Mrs. Broke paused to recontinue her scrutiny. Her first sensation was one of displeasure. The person was not clad in the colours in which her fancy had chosen to depict her. You could not call her vulgar. And she could hardly be designing with a countenance of such babelike candour, of such unmitigated innocence. The phantasm of the adventuress with the previous husband had already faded as completely as though it had never been. Indeed as she continued to look upon the child, she could begin to understand in a sense Billy's immense anxiety. Our redoubtable lady had decided in her own mind that his attitude was a little farcical, which bald facts would presently expose, but now she had set eyes on the object of his solicitude she began reluctantly enough to discern a reason for it.

The creature was, indeed, a delicate fragile thing. To wound her would be like pulling a wing off a butterfly. Our redoubtable lady sighed. The faint odour of romance that her matter-of-fact nostrils scented, annoyed her. It seemed as though there was nothing to be done. She had come into meanness to look for vulgarity, and instead

she half-feared that she had found something else. Looking in the face of that child, it was impossible by any association of ideas to attribute motive. She could not even attribute design. This strange old person, the aunt, was in her own way also evidently without blemish. Billy's mother could read in those toil-worn eyes an extraordinary solicitude for her niece. In a grotesque and impalpable way it reminded her of the look there was in Billy's when he made her promise not to hurt her. There was a similar quixotic tenderness in the face of this old woman.

Insensibly, our redoubtable lady modified her tones when she spoke next; and the question she asked was by no means the one she had come there to put. The mode of it and the inflection would doubtless have increased the sense of annoyance under which she laboured had she been listening to the sound of her own voice.

"Are you very deeply in love with my son?"

The child looked across to her without speaking: a soft light as of tears trembled round her eyelashes.

"You love him, child?"

"I could not make you understand how much I love him, ma'am."

"Yes, child, I think you could. I suppose if you learnt that you had done him an injury—unwittingly, of course—you would be very much distressed."

"I could not do him an injury."

"I said unwittingly."

"I do not think it would be possible for me to do him an injury. I could not have a thought that would do him harm. I do not see how I could do him an injury."

For once Mrs. Broke was at a loss to know how to press her point strictly in accordance with the rules of the game. She was under a pledge to Billy not to hurt the child; although to be sure when she made that promise her own private interpretation of it was not to "hurt the fine feelings of this person." But she was fain to confess now she had seen her, that promise or no promise, it was hardly in her power wantonly to cause her pain. In a sense she was almost like a piece of gossamer, the stuff of which dreams

are fashioned. A rude breath upon that fragility, and it might dissolve, and the creature evanish in the thin air.

Indeed our redoubtable lady, so cool, so unemotional, so instinct with restraint, was afraid that she had caught herself in the act of making a sort of excursion into sentiment. Her attitude towards this pitiful little piece of life who had ruined her son, and had ruined her and her family also, was growing to be as indefensible as was his. She, too, hostile as she was and must be, was becoming possessed with a ludicrous sense of the immunity conferred upon the child by her sacred innocence. The wretched little creature had ruined them all with no more effectual weapon than that. The affair was too consciously ironical. The President of those mocking Immortals who sate in heaven had a true eye for the incongruous when he selected the innocence of a babe as the instrument to level to its native dust an Inordinate Pride which had towered above the centuries. The galled woman saw all this too clearly, but yet she stayed the hand that was poised to strike. It was as though she held a small bird captive in her gripe. The slightest pressure of those powerful fingers and the last wild flutterings in the tremulous breast would be for ever quiet. For the first time in her life the admirable lady, whose exterior was of the consistency of polished steel, who had disciplined her own daughters ruthlessly, and had known how to make them suffer for the common good, found herself picking words and phrases with a peculiar discretion, a peculiar nicety. She must take care not so much as to brush that flowerlike sensitiveness. If a rose-petal is touched it is bruised.

"I think, child," she said, still gazing at the wife of her son, "that you look a little thin. You look rather delicate."

"Yes, ma'am, she does," interposed the aunt, with some eagerness. "It was a long way for her to go to Bond Street to the shop. It was not convenient for her to live in, you see, ma'am, because Perkin and Warbeck's were so short of room. Besides, Alice liked the liberty of walking to and fro. Shop life is very hard, ma'am. It is almost like being in a prison from morning till night, only in a prison I suppose you are sometimes allowed to sit down.

She could not have stood it much longer; it was wearing her out. But she had to go out to work to keep a roof over both our heads, because my dressmaking business is not large enough to provide work for two. But I thank God, ma'am, that that is all over now. Mr. Broke has been so kind, you don't know. She is not to go to work any more. On Tuesday—the day they were married, you know, ma'am—he gave her a five-pound note; and when he can make the proper arrangements he says he will get her away into the country. He says she wants the country air. And so she does, ma'am. If her parents before her could have had it, they might have been spared many years longer than they were."

"They are both dead, I presume?"

"Her father died of a rapid consumption before she was born, and her mother did not survive her birth."

"You adopted your niece, Miss Sparrow?"

"Yes, ma'am. It has been a struggle, but God has seen fit to help us. And I will say this, ma'am, from the day I buried her mother Alice has never been anything but a joy to me. She has never given me a moment of trouble or anxiety. She has been a perfectly good and obedient girl, and now, ma'am, she has her reward."

"I gather that the union of your niece and my son meets with your approval, Miss Sparrow?"

"Oh, ma'am, it is just like a dream! I can't tell you how many times since she grew up to be so beautiful I have dreamt that Alice would marry a gentleman. It was what a lady like you would call a great presumption, I know, ma'am, but you cannot think how necessary it had come to seem. The only thing that could save her from the shop was for her to become a wife. But you see, ma'am, a common-natured man would not have done for her. She is made too delicate for that. Even a fine clothes gentleman, a merely rich gentleman would not have done for her. He had to be a gentleman by nature as well, ma'am, a gentleman born and bred. She puts me in mind of a flower, ma'am, that has to be planted on the south side of a wall so that it may get the sun, and be screened from the cold wind. I have been able to do that myself, ma'am, in a way; not altogether in the way I

should like, you know, ma'am; but I am certain that things have not been quite so hard for her as they would have been without me. It would have been so lonely for her if I had not been here; and when she got home every night from the shop at a quarter to nine, there would have been no fresh cup of tea waiting for her. But she has been very much to me, ma'am, too. Without her I think I should have given in long ago. I could not have kept on so long without some object to work for. I am seventy-two, ma'am, and I am about worn out. But it doesn't matter now, you know, ma'am. I am perfectly content. And I am very grateful. It is very kind of God to remember an old woman, and make her dreams come true just as she is giving in."

Mrs. Broke thought of that familiar saying of Goethe's

Was man in der Jugend wünscht, hat man im Alter die Fülle.

"You make me think of the words of a great German poet," she said to the old woman. "In youth what one wishes, in age one shall have as much as one will."

"It is more than true in my case, ma'am. When your son, the noblest-looking gentleman I have ever seen—I hope you won't mind my saying it, ma'am—came and sat in that very chair you are sitting in now, and he said, 'Miss Sparrow, do you mind if I marry your niece?' do you know, ma'am, I nearly broke down. Your son might have come from heaven, for if I had had my pick of all the gentlemen in the world for Alice, I think I should have chosen him. From the way he spoke I could tell how he loved her. And as for Alice, morning, noon, and night, all day and every day she has no thoughts in her mind but what are caused by him."

"I suppose, Miss Sparrow, you have had to work very hard at your dressmaking," said Billy's mother. The strain the old woman had entered upon was rather more than even that stoical person cared to support.

"Yes, ma'am, I have," said the old woman with hesitation: "I know that rich people who wear splendid clothes and ride in carriages and pairs are supposed to despise poor people who have to work for their bread; but I think I can own it

to you, ma'am, because you are Mr. Broke's mother, and have his kind ways. Yes, ma'am, I have been a worker; 'an old struggler,' as the old woman said to the great Doctor Johnson. I daresay, ma'am, you read that beautiful anecdote last week in the *Family Herald*—I always think that those stories of great men on the last page are alone worth a penny. Not, you know, ma'am, that it is the actual work that grinds you down. It is the fear. It makes the blood run cold in your body when you think what must happen if you cannot find the three and sixpence for the landlord every Friday. It may sound like boasting, ma'am, to you, but all the forty-two years I have lived in this house I have never had to ask for a day longer in which to pay the rent. I don't think there are many who can say that. But the rent is only one thing, although the most important. There is the gas and the water, and you can't do without tea and bread and butter, and coals in winter. Then sometimes you want clothes too; and there are all manner of little odds and ends of expense when you least expect them. Of course I know, ma'am, that you rich ladies despise all this. Some of you would call it low, I dare say, although, ma'am, I am sure you would not. You are the mother of Mr. Broke; and I could not have opened my heart to you like this if I could not trust you, you being his mother. You see, ma'am, strive as you may at dressmaking you can hardly ever put more than a penny or twopence by in a week for a rainy day. And for the last few years I have had great fears. My eyesight has been failing. I have not been able to sit so long as I used to. And then you always have the fear that as you grow old you may lose your custom, or you may be paralysed. But those are the thoughts that you hardly dare to speak about."

"Exactly: May I ask how my son first became acquainted with your niece?"

Again had Billy's mother felt the need for a change of theme.

"He first saw her at Perkin and Warbeck's shop, ma'am. I think he got friendly with her by coming in to buy things. But it was not until he bought a pair of lady's gloves of her, and then asked her to accept them, that she spoke

of him to me. Of course, ma'am, I had always told her never to take a present from any gentleman, not even a bunch of violets. You may have daughters of your own, ma'am, but even if you have you must forgive me for saying, ma'am, that I don't suppose you have any idea how careful poor girls working in public for their living have to be. It is almost a curse, ma'am, if they are born good-looking. There are two kinds of gentlemen, ma'am, just as there are two kinds of most things. There's the good and the bad; and to young girls, ma'am, either kind is so much more dangerous than those gentlemen who are not gentlemen.

"From that time, ma'am, he was always paying her little attentions, so that no matter what warnings I gave her she began to think of nothing else but Mr. Broke. I nearly went down on my knees to her, ma'am, to beg her to be careful. She was a very good girl; and I could see how hard she tried to heed my warnings not to think about him. But oh, ma'am, no matter what she did, Mr. Broke had her in his power. If he had not been the good sort of gentleman, I dare not think of what might have happened. You may have daughters of your own, as I say, ma'am; and you may have seen a girl in love against her own judgment. It is very terrible. We both used to cry together about it in the evenings when she got home, and we used to pray together; but Mr. Broke got at last so that he could twist Alice round his little finger. She could not help herself; Mr. Broke was too strong for her; it was almost like what you might call fate. Then he took to writing to her; and she used to go almost wild. She would hardly allow his letters to go out of her hands; and she always carried them in her pocket, backwards and forwards to the shop.

"And I will confess it to you now, ma'am, it was a torment, a torture to me all the time. I had never seen this Mr. Broke; and you must forgive me for saying it, ma'am, but I did not believe in him. Gentlemen who write their letters on that sort of notepaper, real officers of the Queen at Windsor Castle, don't mean any good as a rule to the likes of us. But I misjudged him, you see, ma'am, I misjudged him; and if the gratitude of an old

and poor woman who has never had a daughter of her own is worth anything, and I don't suppose that it is, from my heart I give it to your son, Mr. Broke. I honour him, ma'am; I think of him with reverence, because for a gentleman of his position it comes so easy to be dishonourable. I say what I know, ma'am, because when I was about Alice's age, or a little older, I too—I—only in my case—only!——"

The old woman stopped abruptly. A faint tinge of colour crept into her yellow face, and she trembled violently. A moment afterwards her eyes filled with tears. A somewhat disconcerting silence ensued, during which the harsh and furrowed features melted and relaxed. It was for an instant only, however. Her face almost immediately resumed the expression which time and labour had given to it.

"I—I am talking to you, ma'am, as I don't think I have ever talked to any one before," the old woman continued hastily. "You are, as I say, Mr. Broke's mother. You are just like him in many ways. When I talk to you I almost feel as if I am talking to him. I know that I can can trust you and respect you. And perhaps nobody ever will know but God and my own mind, what the reason is that I honour and respect your son so much."

Mrs. Broke rose and took up her coat. Her interview had proved a more painful business than she had anticipated. Every topic of this old woman imbued her with the same feeling of discomfort. Her simplicity struck unerringly home. Her extreme candour, and innocence of spirit became barbs to fret the susceptibilities of this wise and experienced lady.

As Mrs. Broke rose to go the young girl came from her station behind the table where she had been standing as far from her mother-in-law as she could get, and made a timid offer to help her to put on her coat. As she did so Mrs. Broke gazed somewhat abstractedly at the feats of colour embodied in her hair and her soft skin, which the slightly flushed appearance of her cheeks seemed to enhance. She tried to peer through the mysterious dark lights of her eyes, where still brooded the ineffable secrets of her childhood. She looked upon the fragile grace of the so slender

limbs; the quick little movements by which they expressed a fawnlike fear, and the startled half-appealing air as of childhood throwing itself upon the mercy of maturity, with which she came forward to confront the mother of her husband.

Mrs. Broke accepted in silence her service of holding the fur coat, and of deftly aiding the insinuation of her matronly form within it. Without speaking, our august lady continued to regard her for some time after she was ready to go. This wretched slip of a child had ruined Billy; had probably ruined them all; and her real motive in penetrating that morning into the heart of that squalid district was to inform her of those facts in just so many words. Curiosity had been the pretext she had given, even to herself; but deep down in the feminine heart of her she knew all the time there had been concealed a cold spirit of revenge. If the creature really did love Billy, of course after the fashion of her kind, as the boy in his infatuation insisted that she did, she would know how to punish her for that act of presumption. But as the galled woman continued to look upon that strange radiance, no thought of retaliation, of revenge, was there to sully her. Perhaps she had never been so completely quelled in her life. The wistful appealing air of this babe among womenkind would have struck the venom out of the heart of King Herod. The fair child was a creature of mist, besprinkled with gold dust from the wings of a butterfly. She was a fairy made out of a piece of gossamer. To look upon her was to be disarmed; to approach her was to think of love.

At last our redoubtable lady took away her eyes and moved to the door of the little room. Suddenly, however, she returned and taking the child by the shoulders, kissed her gravely.

"I think," she said, "it is necessary that you should get away from this horrid London, away into the country as soon as you can. I have been thinking out a small scheme. There is a little cottage near where I live, quite a pretty little cottage on the top of a hill, a very healthy and breezy cottage. I think I can find a few small articles of furniture to put in it; but you must give me,

say a fortnight, to have it painted and whitewashed, and then you must come at once; and your aunt must come too. There must be no more dressmaking; no more payments of three and sixpence every Friday to the landlord. If it is possible I think you will be wise to sell your furniture. The carriage of it to your new home will probably exceed its value. But of course I do not mean that if there are any things particularly dear to you that you are not to bring them. Do so by all means. Now, here is another note for five pounds to banish that horrid dressmaking. You must both of you promise never to do another stitch. And if you want some more money to help you to move, you will please write to me, will you not? Here is a card with my address upon it.

"Good-bye now. I will write to tell you the day upon which your cottage will be ready. It has honeysuckle and clematis running all over it, and a little garden in front full of flowers and apple trees; and there is a wood on the side of the hill behind, in which in the spring and summer the birds sing all day, and half the night as well. I feel sure it will enchant you. Good-bye; and do not fail to let me know the day upon which I may expect you. You must take a ticket for Cuttisham at Paddington station, and you shall be met on arrival."

Kissing her daughter-in-law for the second time, and shaking hands with Miss Sparrow rather less perfunctorily than was her wont, Lady Bountiful escaped the scene of gratitude she saw to be brewing, by moving swiftly through the dark evil-smelling passage to the street.

Her appearance there was a great relief to her sister's horses, who had been pacing up and down the dirty thoroughfare, to keep themselves warm, for more than an hour. The relief to her sister's coachman and footman was even greater. Those serious gentlemen had come to the conclusion, by slow degrees, that Mrs. Broke had been murdered in that most evil-looking house. And they were inclined to think by that time her mutilated body had been made away with. When their mistress, the Honourable Mrs. Reginald Twysden-Cockshott, went slumming, never by any chance did she stay longer than two minutes in any particular house. And even then she did not go alone,

and it was always arranged that the police should be in the neighbourhood.

As the carriage containing Mr. Broke's mother glided and tinkled out of the squalid street, aunt and niece were locked in one another's arms, faint with tears.

CHAPTER XVIII

A Short Excursus; and a Conversation apropos of Nothing

MRS. BROKE had been shaken to the foundations of her belief. For the first time her lines had been cast among the Poor; the Poor to whom the struggle for existence is a birthright; the Poor whose sole heritage is an unwholesome mind in an unwholesome body, the memorial of generation after generation bred to humiliation and despair. She was in the habit of playing the part of Lady Bountiful to the labouring class in her territorial hamlet, and she found the occupation pastoral. But Hampden Road was vastly different. The glimpse it had afforded of poverty by acreage, of want, degradation, and disease, massed and in the aggregate, had a little amazed, a little overwhelmed her.

Emphatically she was a person belonging to her own class. She saw with their eyes, heard with their ears, understood with their understanding. She had taken it for granted, in a bland and not too definite manner, that the denizens of Hampden Road, who were written down as so many millions in the statistics of the population, enjoyed an existence of a kind in some remote and alien latitude. They were certainly known to exist, because there was a column of police intelligence in the *Standard* newspaper every morning, and anthropologists wrote of them in books. One assumed they were akin to the Fijians. One heard of them in a precisely similar fashion, without having any more arresting testimony of their existence. They were both equally remote. The Fijians were a coloured people living in the Tropics; the Poor

were a dirty people living in Unpleasantness. The Fijians owed their savagery to their nakedness, and their colour to the heat of the sun. The Poor owed their poverty to their viciousness, and their squalor to natural inclination.

On going forth into those unexplored regions she did not expect to be confronted with a pair of intensely, exaggeratedly human persons struggling against a grim monster that was pressing out their lives. The thing had been so vivid, so actual, that she could not deny its authenticity. It must be allowed to rank as a page of experience.

More than once on her way back to her own impoverished family in the country Mrs. Broke shuddered when she recalled the significance of three and sixpence every Friday for the landlord; and the aching toil involved in its acquisition. They were poor themselves. Of late they had come to consider their own poverty as too positive, too palpable and bitter. But now she had seen the aunt and niece in Hampden Road her views were slightly tinged with horror. It was as though she and her class belonged to a superhuman caste of person, a something excelling human, whose tenement was in the rarefied ether of a planet other than our common earth. The very things they had come to regard as pregnant with life and death did not exist at all for the denizens of Hampden Road. It was a little bewildering that two races of human beings should grow up side by side, sprung from a common Maker and a common soil, and yet have these elemental differences. It was a little incredible that there should be a race of lonely women, living cheek by jowl with her, differing from her in not one essential of flesh and blood—women derived of women, breathing the same air, stuffed with the same aspirations and emotions as herself, whose only luxury was Death.

Mrs. Broke went back to her husband and children in the country with her thoughts diverted in a measure from the wreck of the fortunes of her house. It seemed almost to savour of cynicism to view at that moment Billy's marriage in such a light, when so recently she had been face to face with an ampler suffering. When she drove out of Cuttisham into the bare wind-bitten lanes leading to Covenden it was good to breathe again the pure and

shrewd airs of the countryside after the foul vapours of London. At that instant the wish foremost in her was never to set foot again in the nauseating place. She wanted to shut Hampden Road out of her consciousness for ever. She must forget it. It was a nightmare to hold her soul in thrall.

An uneasy sense had entered into her for the first time that she and her kind, the moneyed and privileged classes of which she was an insignificant unit, had directly to answer for such a state of things. It seemed to give the verdict against them at once as unworthy of their responsibilities. Several times already she had caught herself in the act of thinking aloud to a somewhat extravagant tenour: "We may burke it, we may shirk it, we may run from it, we may shut it out from our lives by building stone walls around them, but we shall not always be able to keep our park gates between it and our guilt. One day it will come home to us. We shall be called on to pay in kind for the obligations we have disregarded. Dear God! how patient they are! One would suppose that they have their pride too. They must be a tenacious terrier-like breed of people; they fight in silence, and hold on to the last. But it cannot be so always. They have their periodical revolutions in France; by what miracle do we not have ours!"

It was about the luncheon hour that Mrs. Broke turned in at the gates of her demesne. On her way to the house she encountered a solitary individual walking towards her. It was Delia's tutor. Since the unfortunate day on which he had taken up his duties the young man had received no invitation to take another meal at her table. On the only occasion of his being thus honoured he had not been a success.

However, the sight of his lonely figure touched a chord in her now. To-day for the first time she was troubled with misgiving as to the infallibility of her judgment. Three days ago she would not have been able to support the suggestion that her beautifully-balanced reason could lead her astray. Her experience was too wide, her insight too searching. Did they not render her invulnerable to error? This morning, however, she was not so sure.

There came into her mind a faint analogy between the man walking towards her with his eyes on the earth and the two women she had lately seen in Hampden Road, London, N. His slightness, his paleness, his shabbiness, the self-effacing air of his exterior all contributed to the comparison. Thoughts of an uncomfortable intimacy sprang loose in her; ludicrous thoughts, grotesque, farcical thoughts, which had never dared to obtrude before in that complacent intelligence. They began insolently, obstreperously to compare her own private lot with his.

She had had a comfortable carriage and a fleet pair of horses to bear her the four miles from Cuttisham. This young man, the denizen of an inferior orbit, would have to be borne the same four miles on the soles of his feet. In ten minutes she would be sitting down to a solid meal; this young man, if he pursued a diligent career, might hope to do the same in something under an hour and a quarter. In his case, however, the nature of the meal might prove a little problematical. He had already walked four miles that morning, and had spent several hours thereafter in toiling with his brain, an exhausting form of labour. She, on the other hand, began the duties of her day when she drank a cup of tea in bed at a quarter to eight. She had submitted to be dressed by somebody else about an hour later; had taken breakfast at half-past nine; had spent the remainder of the morning in a little gossip, in a little shopping, in driving to the railway station, in sitting on the cushions of a first-class compartment, and in driving from it.

It is true that this picture of their divergent lots was a trifle over-coloured. But that was essential; a trick of the impertinent person, the artist. Without a measure of incisive exaggeration no picture can count on its appeal. A less graphic parallel, and our humane lady would not now have been in the act of demanding of herself the reason why the hard-working fellow could not have received the common piece of courtesy at her hands of being allowed to eat at her table every time he came.

When the young man came near, and took his eyes from the earth and looked at her vaguely, with a faintly perceptible doubt as to whether she would choose to see

him, Mrs. Broke stopped her carriage. She beckoned to Porter to come to her.

"Good morning, Mr. Porter. Will you not return to luncheon?"

"Thank you very much," said the young man rather abstractedly, "but I am in no immediate need. I have an irrepressible habit of providing for myself. I enjoy the sensation of doing three things at once. I eat, walk, and think."

He exhibited a small packet of white tissue paper.

Mrs. Broke made a gesture.

"You are indeed a man of resources," she said archly. "But if you do not return with me to-day, I shall think you are angry with me. You have been coming out here for more than a month, and yet my unpardonable stupidity has driven you to these expedients. But, really, I must blame you a little also. You ought to have stayed to luncheon every day as a matter of course. Promise me you will never, never wait for an invitation again. Get in, please, and say you forgive me."

In the face of such a charming humble insistence, Mr. Porter was fain to get in and say he did forgive the mellifluous lady. She gave him the place of honour beside her, and prattled to him dulcetly upon the subject of literature.

At the luncheon table the family were found to be in full assembly. Mrs. Broke piloted Mr. Porter to a seat, and with a gracious bow that embraced her husband, Miss Wayling, and her girls, she took a place by his side. And there was at least one fortunate aspect to her hardly agreeable preoccupation with him. His presence there, under her wing, freed her for the time being from embarrassing questions as to the nature of the business that had summoned her to London so suddenly.

"Now tell me about your work, Mr. Porter," she said, while the young man was fishing for a pickled onion with a long-handled fork.

"I am afraid," said Mr. Porter, with a puckered countenance, after twice failing to spear a fat one on which he had set his mind, "I am afraid my work is not easy to describe. Unless one happens to have complete sym-

pathy with my point of view, it were best perhaps that I did not attempt the task."

The slightest possible dart of anger replaced the bland affability in the face of his questioner. There he went again! His matter-of-fact tone might do something to blunt the edge of his too-palpable rudeness, but it could not obliterate the snub. Plainly the egregious fellow had meant to convey that his opinion of her understanding was so poor that he could find a more profitable means of using his time than by treating her seriously.

She hardly knew when she had been so annoyed. It was a wholly new experience for a hostess of her felicity and finesse to be patronized by a mere boy at her own table. However, as she had a craving for the present to play the part of Lady Bountiful in her dealings with all and sundry, she set herself steadily to look past his lack of manners, and determined to push forward the good work of moral and intellectual enlightenment. He was a bear, a boor, but that should not deter her. The crown of martyrdom she would be called on to wear in the endeavour would be in the nature of a penance for many years of blind intolerance towards his class and those still lower.

"I do not wonder," she said, with so perfect an inflection of humility that it could only have sounded another note in the most delicately educated ear, "that you should think so meanly of me. My futile attempts to rise to your level must strike you as impertinent. But women, you know, are intrepid. Ignorant, I fear, is the masculine name. As a sex we are apt to overrate our strength."

"This is a question of temperament rather than of capacity," said the young man, with a slight air of preoccupation that his patroness was only too quick to resent. "It has no reference whatever to the power of your intellect, but simply to its emotional character. It has no sentiment for literature."

"I confess myself mystified," said Mrs. Broke. "I read a great deal, and I pride myself in very good books, in books that have outlived criticism."

"So I have perceived. Upon that I base my calculation."

"My mystification increases."

"I would wish to imply that you do not approach the greatest among books in the highest spirit of the devotee."

"I read Greek tragedy in the original tongue."

"Forgive me if I suggest that you read it in the spirit in which you read the daily newspaper."

"You do me less than justice if you hold me insensible to its matchless qualities."

"You study it as a text-book, but the unique nature of its art is a dead letter to you. If I may say so, you approach literature from a purely practical, dare I say mercantile, standpoint. You read books for what you can take from them; you do not read them for what you can take to them."

"Surely a paradoxical saying."

"Paradox is only truth walking backwards. But I have not expressed myself very clearly. I wanted to imply that for a person with my outlook there is no hope for those who only go to literature in quest of the hard fact—and yet that does not half express what I mean."

"But surely we acquire from books? If I understand you aright, you would have them acquire from us."

"Do not let us be too literal. Literature assists our mental development in much the same manner that a plate of cold beef and pickled onions assists our physical. But in the mere acquisition of knowledge it can hardly be said to count. Books are no more than so many bundles of soiled paper. We do not learn any more from them than from a dead cow and a spiced vegetable. One living human mind, yours or mine, counts for more than all the wisdom collected and inscribed upon the sheepskins of antiquity."

"A question of terms, is it not? That particular generalization is obvious to everybody. Let us come down to the particular. You would not say that my mind or yours could do anything for Shakespeare?"

"You must forgive me if I do not agree. Books like Shakespeare's are written in cypher; they cannot be read at all without a key. And the key is—your heart and mine. Even he in the most perfect expression of his spirit, the amplest expression the world has known, can only hope to indicate a few fresh courses that the

emotional, the reflective, the imaginative parts of us are to go upon. Lear teaches us nothing with which we were not perfectly acquainted long before he made his kingdom over to his daughters. But when the sufferings of the enfeebled and insane old man melt our blood into tears, we have added a fresh fact to the aggregate of the world's experience. When I see the old man, my father, holding that heart-moving history in his hand, and the tears are shining on his cheeks, I know that many infinite moments such as these have gone to the making of the bewilderingly complex mechanism that he calls his son. Forgive the egotism. It is the curse of persons born under my unlucky star."

"I am very sensible of the honour of these confidences. But I accuse you of basing your calculation on the assumption that the mind of every reader has this special endowment. Surely every mind cannot have it; my own, for instance."

"There is my point. Nature has not given you the key to the cypher. It is the root of our argument. You will remember it arose when I said I could not tell you of my work."

"May I not still have a sympathetic interest in it? Only genius may love, but surely the most pedestrian of earth-walkers may admire."

"Yes; perhaps I am too arbitrary. But even your person of taste is but a second-hand admirer. Would Shakespeare occupy his present place in the national esteem unless Mr. Jones and Mr. Smith and several thousands of other persons of similar renown and credit had dinned his pre-eminence into our ears?"

"He would not, and I hope you identify yourself with the national obtuseness?"

"That is true courage; but it indicates the divergence of our ways. And you force me to concede that the time we devote to him in the stalls of the Lyceum Theatre is not wasted. Irving is as near the real Shakespeare as Pope is near the real Homer, but their rule of thumb interpretations have their uses."

"Arrogance; surely? Is it the arrogance of genius one hears so much about?"

"I begin to fear it. Of late I have grown so impatient. Every battle a man wins for his art reacts upon his suavity."

"You practise the art of literature?"

"Perhaps, yes. I strive and strive, but generally have to hurl the pen out of my clumsy fingers with tears of chagrin."

"You interest me. Tell me what great end you have in view?"

"The end will seem trivial, yet I assure you I find it vastly difficult. I seek to gain the power to express in a simple formula, but in a formula that is sufficiently adequate, a few of those adventures of the spirit that make the Dream, the Phantasm, the Chimera, the What-you-will I call Existence at once a heaven and a hell. Please forgive a little turgidity."

"You are a poet?"

"I have no wings, alas! I cannot soar. Therefore my ideas, that no doubt have been the common property of man since he first scratched his thoughts on stone, have to be content with a humbler vehicle. But this is vain and foolish. My reticence is cast aside before the cruel eyes of the irreverent. I stand revealed a coxcomb; but rather would I beg you to take it, that flushed a little with my first victory I do not feel quite the same harsh necessity for silence.

"Why this diffidence, my friend? You overwhelm me with interest. What is this maiden victory to which you allude?"

"There was something, perhaps quite trivial in itself, on which I sought to lay my finger in the work of this very Shakespeare, this Chinese puzzle we are never tired of trying to solve. The thing was not new; it must have been in the minds of all men of perception since Heming and Condell printed their folio. Still, I had never seen it set forth in plain terms. Even Goethe had not expressed it exactly. It could be traced in the minds of them all, floating disembodied and impalpable, a will o' the wisp that eluded all efforts to capture and embalm it in sentient speech. Charles Lamb came the nearest; but he approached half unconsciously in the casual way that was

his habit, and withdrew his hands almost at the moment his strong but so whimsical fingers seemed but to need to stretch out to take it in their grasp. Now I felt in my own mind that our English tongue was a fine enough medium by which to express it. The thesis was simple enough. What had to be said was cut in the mind like a cameo, yet it defied a reduction to terms. However, in the intrepidity of his youth, one Alfred Porter rose up and grappled with it. At first it seemed in danger of becoming the 'Figure in the Carpet,' that little story by Henry James. Thirty-three times he wrestled with it; thirty-three times he was overthrown. On each occasion he burnt his failure with a grimmer determination in his heart. Sometimes it was with utter weariness and sickness of the spirit, but never with despair. At the thirty-fourth attempt he rang the bell. He could hear it tinkle faintly but distinctly. His victory, however, has had the unhappy consequence of giving him an even stauncher belief in himself than he had before."

"May I ask had your victory any fruits other than your own personal satisfaction?"

"Yes, indeed. That is the strange part; otherwise the whole matter would have been a perfect episode, fit for Flaubert. I sent it, it was but a small thing, ten thousand words or so, to the editor of the *International Review*, that great journal for the upholding of the honour of literature, which never yet has been found unworthy of its mission. That act of itself was presumptuous, for I had no credential other than my determination to succeed. And here is the prosaic part. The editor has offered to appoint me to his review at a salary of £800 a year."

"Of course you repudiated his offer with scorn?"

"Alas! I am afraid I am not sufficiently Philistine. I was not in the least insulted, I confess. I accepted his offer with gratitude. And one could read the generosity of the man's nature. He had never seen me; to him I was meaningless, apart from the fact that I had a pair of eyes to look at life, and a spirit that was determined to express what they saw. And that was enough. I might have leapt at a hundred pounds a year for all he knew, as indeed I should."

" This is very singular, is it not? One understood that you lions of literature despised the sordid pounds and shillings."

" In a sense perhaps; but I think we make a point of accepting them when they come our way. They don't come too often. We generally have 'to go through the mill.' "

" Have you had 'to go through the mill,' Mr. Porter, if the question is a fair one?"

" I have had to fight, and have to do so still, but I do not forget that it is a conflict in which others have lost more blood."

" Pray tell me of it, if I may hope so to be honoured with your confidence. You interest me painfully. I understood that your father was in fairly easy circumstances."

" On the contrary, his circumstances have never been even fairly easy. He exists, and that is all. He exists with a few first editions, a few rare books in his back sitting-room. When stress of financial weather forces him to part with one of these it is like the severing of his right hand. He is a dear, queer, impracticable old man, with just a saving touch of the heroic. When the idea came into his mind that his son must go to the university, he proposed to send him there by parting with his treasures. He declined to go, however, at that great price. I knew that the development of the powers with which he credited me was the only undertaking that could have led him to the extreme step."

" He felt you were marked out for great things?"

" In a way he did. My father is a singular man. He belongs to the company of the 'mute, inglorious Miltons.' He has the emotional and intellectual equipment of a poet, but has no more power of utterance than a tin trumpet or a penny whistle. He has the truest instinct for all that has been finely uttered, but the power of utterance itself is denied to him."

" And he makes a tragedy of it?"

"No; he is too sane. Perhaps, as he grew old, he might have allowed it to embitter him had not the recognition of what he supposed to be my budding powers done so

much to reconcile him to his fate. He told me this morning that since I received that letter from the editor of the *Review*, nearly a week ago, his life has grown larger. But with all this wonderful solicitude he is a more jealous critic of my work than I am myself. His taste is exquisite, and his spirit seems to burn purer, intenser because of its suppression."

"Do I gather that he grants this power of utterance to his son?"

"I think I may say yes, although it argues much courage and insight for one of my father's austerity to detect the true note in the child's first performances upon a comb and a piece of tissue paper."

"His reward is assured to him already. But tell me a little of yourself, your uphill struggle. May I ask how you contrived to maintain yourself at the university?"

The young man laughed. There was no joy in him, however.

He hesitated.

"I beg your pardon, but may I assume that it was necessary that you should undergo a course at the university to prepare yourself for the end you had in view?"

"Both my father and I thought so at the time. There was the glamour of the name, and I am afraid we had both idealized its functions whilst remaining in perfect ignorance of its methods. It had been a kind of ambition of my father's to see a son of his at the university, and in my case he thought this aspiration to be essential. We knew no one who had been there, no one who could disabuse our minds of our heresies."

"And you regretted it?"

"Not altogether. But the game was not worth the candle. It may have increased any little grit there was in me, but I think I can say with justice that at the present moment I owe less than nothing to my academic training. It retarded my development. I had to lose the habit of looking at life with an eye-glass. I had to unlearn much that I was taught before I could recapture my power of vision. It is preserved intact, I hope and believe; but it is because my honest natural eyesight has been able to reassert itself."

" You fill me with surprise. It is not usual for so young a man to have such a definite outlook. You appear to understand clearly what you are about to accomplish, and the best means to take of accomplishing it. I suppose now you have accepted this suggestion of the editor's, you will turn your face to the east and make for the Mecca of the literary man."

" I have promised to take up my duties there in a month's time. I am glad to have had this opportunity of talking to you, since after then I fear it will no longer be possible for me to coach Miss Broke. I have written to Lady Bosket to say so."

" I am sure it will be a misfortune for the child, although she has had the privilege of receiving a certain amount of your instruction. Did you find her hopeless ? "

" On the contrary, I could not have wished for an apter pupil."

" This is praise indeed. One feels, Mr. Porter, that it is not easy for you to bestow praise."

" Perhaps you are right. But in this case, if it may be any sort of satisfaction to you to know it, I will confess I have found Miss Broke peculiarly interesting. She is the first of her sex with whom I have been brought into intimate contact, and it has been an experience. Besides, I have a feeling, you must please forgive it, that you do not extend quite the same justice to her as, for example, you do to myself. One feels it to be a pity, for she does not deserve to be underrated. Her sympathies are so quick, so remarkable."

" You relieve me. I had nearly made up my mind that the child was wholly destitute of intelligence."

" It is painful to hear you say that. Such an opinion is, under your pardon, unwarrantable. The graces of her mind may not be set forth to the public view, so that every passer-by may become acquainted with them ; but perchance on that account they are the more exquisite, the more permanent. In judicious hands—in hands of a requisite tenderness, of a wise and patient encouragement, hers might prove a particularly full and complete and satisfactory life. But I am sure that if this is not her fate, if the hands she should happen to fall into should

be ruder and coarser, her life will not be a success. I confess that I tremble for her. It seems almost inevitable that she should be sacrificed on the altar of the average man, that blundering, well-meaning ruffian whose mind is merged in his dinner. For a creature of sensibility all compact to be the victim of some such rough and honest rogue would be a dire thing. Such fragile creatures must be nurtured carefully. Perfect co-operative sympathy must be their daily food. One foresees that the honest rogue with whom she may mate will act on that excellent matrimonial principle of giving her clothes in exchange for her cookery. One fears that in her case it will not do. He will have to feed as well as clothe her. He will have to feed her out of his own hands, with the choicest blood of his spirit."

"You astonish me! I had not thought that the child's nature would make demands of this kind. I tremble for her myself."

So absorbed had these two alien persons been in their conversation that they had already long outstayed everybody at the luncheon table. Mrs. Broke had basked in the sensation of a slightly malicious triumph. The somewhat aggressive young man might frankly despise her intellectual equipment, but she knew how to make him lay bare his own. Her art masquerading in the livery of a ready sympathy had completely broken down the barrier of his reticence. She had made him talk to her. He had tacitly confessed that he had revealed more of himself to her already than he had to any other person. At the same time he had interested her keenly. He was a man with a personality.

When they rose and repaired to the drawing-room our redoubtable lady was in better conceit with herself than she had been all that day. In a measure her talk with the young man had restored something of her complacence. She had enjoyed a success, almost a triumph. Insensibly, on the top of the proud thought, the young man was hoisted in her estimation. Whoever he was and whatever he was he was emphatically a person to be reckoned with. He was no fool, no weakling. Nay, he was a fighter. He was a born wrestler with adversity. She

was conscious of a feeling of exhilaration in having passed an hour in talking with him, He had a vigour that lifted up the heart like a mountain breeze.

As a manifestation of her agreeable disposition towards him, his patroness asked the young man presently whether he had seen a fragment of the remains of the old hall, in an outlying corner of the park. They were said to have an antiquarian interest. On his replying that he had not, but that it would delight him to have the privilege, Delia was summoned, and it was suggested to her that she should conduct her tutor across the ravine to the hill on which it stood. Neither being reluctant to accede to this plan, it was not long before they were on their way to the ruin.

"An incendiary," was Mrs. Broke's sudden comment to herself as she watched him retire from the room. "I cannot remember when I have been so arrested by a personality. His force and vigour are a little disconcerting, and that sense of the indomitable he manages to instil into one might some day prove inconvenient. It might prove a serious thing for some of us if he turned his attention to politics. It is not a little singular that these children of the people so often possess the secret of this masterful force which ours so often lack."

Suddenly she laughed. A whimsical idea had insinuated itself in the mind of the contemplative lady.

"Is it not foolhardy?" she thought. "Is it not almost like the courting of a second disaster to go out of one's way to throw the wretched child into the company of such a firebrand?"

The idea amused her; but all the same, so inveterate was her habit of wisdom, that she was by no means sure that she would have lent her countenance to the expedition had this grotesque thought occurred to her sooner.

CHAPTER XIX

Two on a Tower

FOOTING it over the young and green grass of spring, Delia and her tutor were not long in crossing the ravine and in pressing up the steep hill on which was set all that remained of the former stronghold of this ancient race of Broke. It was noteworthy that this old hall or castle had this in common with the great houses of antiquity: its architect had chosen one of the fair spots of earth on which to set it.

It stood on a grass-grown eminence, commanding a view of the rich vales and pasture land that stretched beneath. The lush meadows, fat with increase, drowsed below; a clear stream shining in the afternoon sun meandered from little copse to little copse, in which the spring birds sang; the steeples of churches in neighbouring villages were remotely visible, "bosomed high in tufted trees"; while every natural object seemed to point towards and to emphasize the uncommon wisdom which had chosen for a hermitage this fair place.

"Ah, those old builders, what a cunning they had!" said the young man as he toiled up to a piece of crumbling masonry, surrounded by ferns. "They only chose the places fit to receive of their best. It is not easy to get here, but once on these heights one is more than repaid. You come of a favoured race, Miss Broke. Who can conceive anything more delightful than to have an enchanted castle, as I am sure this must have been, to dwell in for a thousand years or so?"

"I do not think we have been any happier because of it,"

said Delia. "It has made no difference to us as far as I can see."

"One would have expected it to breed a whole race of poets and seers, grave worshippers of nature, and those who never slept in their endeavours to surprise her secrets."

"Instead of which," said Delia, who long ago had learnt to speak to him in terms of an ampler equality than when she had known him first, "it seems to have bred a race whose first pleasure has been to destroy her handiwork. If as a race we have been foremost in anything it has been as hunters and soldiers—savage men who have had a passion for destroying or maiming their fellows, and the birds of the air, and the animals that run in the fields."

"A severe indictment, but not an unfair one, I am afraid."

He caught himself musing on her strange air of vehemence.

"I should not have found myself making it a month ago," said Delia, half to herself and hardly intending that he should hear.

Looking back at the moment on that short period which yet seemed so long a time, and in a measure so fraught with destiny, she guessed how great was the change in herself. She had developed by inordinate strides. She was a child then, a little timid thing peeping out of the door of the nursery; she was now a woman feeling the first few premonitory stiflings of the world upon her heart. It was not quite so easy to breathe God's air as it had been a month ago.

To-day there could be no doubt she was unhappy. She was too simple to be able to disguise the fact that her friend's announcement of his going away to London filled her with a sense of loss. From the first morning of his coming she had never been quite the same. There was in him that touch of mystery that was so haunting, that personal glamour which provokes an unrest in the pulses, which seems to hypnotise, to cast a spell. It was not attraction, not fascination altogether; but a stranger, more magical quality which evoked an emotion in his absence which even his presence seemed hardly to disperse.

Never had she wept again because she could not go hunting since that first memorable morning of his coming, when

he had wrung her small secrets out of her, and caused her to burn her treasures. She knew that long ago she had learned to recognize his footfall above all others on the tiles of the hall. She also knew that if she caught the notes of his voice when she did not expect to hear them she was startled in a manner she had never been conscious of before. These were slight things, very trivial phenomena, but taken in conjunction with the present unquietness of her heart, they had the power to make her tremble. She had taken them for signs that she was journeying perilously into that mysterious country from whose bourn no traveller returns unscarred.

Unconsciously the days of his coming had grown to be underlined in her heart. Those days on which he did not come were ineffectual, incomplete. On those days there seemed no reason why she should ever get out of bed in the morning and undertake the ordeal of putting on her clothes. Even hunting, that intoxicating sport, had begun to lose its hold upon her. It took on the same drab hues as the rest of life's diurnal affairs when her friend did not walk out from Cuttisham to bewilder and enchant her. He seemed to carry a special atmosphere of his own about him. He was so assured, so definite in all he said and did; he was so certain of himself. He did not appear to know what faltering or stumbling meant; and it was impossible to deny any secret to those grave kind candid humorous eyes. Tender eyes they were too. There were things that could soften them and give them a look she had learnt to watch for. They were not given to passion. They were too patient, too mild, to have an addiction to violence. Sometimes when he had been surprised into sudden enthusiasms about certain things, a light had been kindled in them which she, this childish worshipper of heroes, liked to think of as a something splendid and imperishable. And once or twice at some tale of man's inhumanity to man, told in the daily newspaper, they had grown so hard as to frighten her more than a little.

Again and again had she been obliged to make the statement to herself that he was a much more complex kind of being than the only other men with whom she was familiar, her father, her brother, and her Uncle Charles. He seemed

to have more component parts; there seemed to be finer shades of meaning in him. There was a constant occupation for her in seeking to fathom what was implied by his strange odd face, which grew stranger and more odd the more you looked at it. It was, indeed, a perpetual puzzle and mystery. When she investigated her father's at the breakfast table there it was as plain as print, as open as the morning. If she looked at those of her mother and her sisters it was easy to read exactly what they were. It was only since she had come to know her friend, and had been baffled by him, that she had taken to doing this sort of thing. Dimly she felt that such behaviour was vain and weak and unworthy, but no matter how she tried not to do so she was thinking perpetually of her friend's mysterious face.

Her companion sat down on a convenient piece of the ruin, and took off his hat. Beads of sweat speckled his brow. He made no secret of the fact that the ascent had distressed him. His breathing was ridiculously assertive. He laughed at his plight, particularly as Delia did not conceal her surprise at it. She was far from exhibiting similar evidences. She looked as cool, as serene as a young fawn that has merely leapt over a brook.

"This is where you athletes take advantage of a bookworm," he said with a whimsical air. "It is preposterous of my heart to beat in this manner because we happen to have climbed this steep hill rather smartly. You do not seem to breathe at all. Your feet skim like a bird's."

"I did not think that such a little exertion would distress you," said Delia. "We ought not to have walked so fast. I am so sorry."

"Odd," said he, "how any inferiority arising from a physical cause provokes a feeling of humiliation in us. It annoys me that I should be sitting in this plight while you do not appear to suffer the least inconvenience. I think I must go into training, as you athletes would say, although walking out here from Cuttisham three times a week has done me a lot of good. But I am afraid I have a rooted objection to physical exercise."

"How strange!" said Delia, "when perfect fitness is such a source of pleasure. It is nicer than anything I know

to feel one's body to be equal to the most arduous task. I hope you do not despise the athlete."

"On the contrary, he or she provokes my admiration. I love to witness feats that involve resolution and agility. It gives me quite a fearful pleasure, although I will not say that now and then they have not a habit of ruffling me a little also. I do not like to have to confess myself defeated in anything."

"Arrogance," said Delia, with a wise little smile and shake of the head.

"I agree, I agree."

"I don't think I would ever accuse you of arrogance really," said Delia, determined to wipe this speck of dust off her idol.

"You would be wrong," said her friend, enjoying her sudden descent into the serious. "It is the besetting sin of the genus. We self-centred people never hesitate to pit ourselves in a comparison with others, and when we draw it, it is not to their advantage, I can assure you. If Such-a-one can do a certain thing I can do it, is what we say. It is wrong, it is deplorable in us, but—but *ce sont les défauts de nos qualités.*"

The young man was in higher spirits this afternoon than he had been in lately.

"You could," said Delia wistfully. "I believe you could do anything if you made up your mind."

"You are quite right," he said, a good deal amused by her earnestness. "But please I must ask you not to make me vainer than I am already."

During the next moment Delia became the victim of an idea. There was a hazardous feat connected with this ruin which she and her five sisters, those perfectly intrepid open-air creatures, were never weary of attempting. The ruin consisted of a single tall wall some twenty feet high. A narrow and precarious parapet formed the top of it; and at the extreme southern end the crazy remains of what had once been a hunting tower rose sheer to the sky, eighty feet from the top of the wall and a hundred feet from the bank on which they were standing now. Seen from this spot, it looked an incredibly insecure and dizzy height. Only the ivy with which it was clad seemed to

hold it together. The tower itself was so bat-ridden and far gone in decay that its mere retention of the power to keep itself upright seemed a direct defiance of the laws of gravitation.

However, so often had Delia and her sisters made the not very difficult ascent of the lower wall itself, and so often had they walked the precarious coping that ran along the top as far as the base of the tower, that they could now perform the feat with the ease, the certainty of an acrobat crossing a tight-rope with a man in a wheelbarrow. To the uninitiated it had a delicious appearance of daring, but they had practised it so often that it had become as simple as the trick of springing into a saddle out of the hand of their father.

The hunting tower itself, however, was much more difficult to overcome. Times without number had they set out to reach the weird emblem in the form of a cross that stood at the top, on a quaint little platform. Not one of them, however, had ever succeeded in making her foothold sufficiently secure in that decrepit masonry covered with ivy and moss which was its only staircase, to scale the full eighty feet of this crazy and wind-shaken altitude. She who accomplished that hazardous task would be the recipient of everlasting honour from her five sisters. At present the record was held by the indomitable Joan, who probably no more fitted by physical development than anybody else to enjoy the honour, yet did so by sheer force of character. The point she had touched was several feet higher than that of the no less indomitable Philippa.

It hardly admitted of question that the plight in which her friend was displayed gave Delia the idea. In mind she felt herself to be his inferior to a cruel degree. But in physique there could be no doubt she was immensely his superior. There was one point at least on which she would not have to bow the knee. The desire to make the most of that advantage was eminently feminine, nor was it less so that she should be possessed by an aspiration to shine in the eyes of one who in his own person united all the other Christian virtues. She had had it from his own lips that feats of an athletic prowess excited his pleasure and his envy. Surely it would be sweet for the despised she to arouse his

wonder by the exhibition of a personal skill which he could never hope to acquire.

With creatures of impulse thought is action. The idea once flashed across her mind, it would not allow her a moment to reflect. In a second, with a joyous, defiant, carolling little laugh she ran to the wall, and before the unsuspecting young man had time to observe, her birdlike feet were scrambling up stone by stone through the moss and crannies. By the time her companion could rise from his seat on the bank to look at what she was about she was already on the parapet of the wall above his head.

"I say, I say! What *are* you doing!"

Her wild feet were already moving along that narrow and precarious coping which formed the top. Jauntily, joyously, she glided across with exquisite and elastic poise as one exultingly unconscious of peril. It was superb; but the startled witness felt already a shock of nervous bewilderment.

"I say, I say, Miss Broke, what *are* you doing!"

Miss Broke turned an apple-blossom cheek over her shoulder towards him, and proceeded to look down upon her friend with an arch laugh lurking in the corners of her lips. The notes of his self-evident alarm floating up from below were as wine and music to her.

"You must come down, you know. It isn't safe, I am sure it isn't safe."

She paid him no heed. There was that kind of madness in her pulses which his startled solicitude increased. Pouting with infectious little trills of joy, her winged feet tripped on and on across the wall. Her petticoats twinkled about her ankles like the motions of a bird with a white breast, falling and rocketting. Her fair curves swayed in the sunlight. Once she made a roguish pretence of missing her footing, and as the heart of the beholder leapt in sudden agitation, she swung round on her audacious heels, and confronted him with a face as frankly fearless, as frankly mischievous as ever emblazoned the vaunting spirit of woman. She looked as tantalising as a squirrel, as bold as a robin, and as sure-footed as a chamois leaping along the face of the Alps.

Before he could guess whither her course was pointed,

she had reached the base of the hunting tower at the far end of the wall. Immediately her deft feet began to climb that dizzy pinnacle. In vain did he call to her, now in tones of horror. She did not stop nor hesitate, nor once glance back. The madness that had taken her had intensified its grip.

It was wonderful that she should be able to find so many holds for her toes along the sheer front of the masonry. The ivy crumpled, and now and then gave way under her hands, the dust was shaken off it and out of its accompanying moss; bats flapped their wings in the upper air; the very crazy old tower itself seemed to grow giddy and appeared to sway. Up and up went the mad thing, not hearing now the entreaties and commands issued to her from below. The amazed, the horrified eye-witness began to lose his self-control.

"Stop for God's sake!" he shouted.

Nothing, however, could check Delia in her extraordinary course. Grasping the tenacious wild growths immediately over her head, and tucking her toes in the invisible niches where the mortar had crumbled from between the stones, she went hand over hand, up and up.

So furious had been her onslaught on that sheer surface, and such had been the quickness with which she had overcome it, that now she swung a truly dangerous height above him, more than two-thirds of the way towards the platform at the top. And it may have been that the terror-stricken tones of the young man's entreaties penetrated to her, for here suddenly she paused for the first time. She turned an instant to look back. In that instant she was lost.

Swinging in mid-air between earth and sky, the impulse that had carried her so far went from her as suddenly as it came. The power to move in one direction or the other ran out of her in that brief but fatal moment of her looking back. She had no longer the self-possession or the courage to pursue her upward course; and the sense she now had of an abyss yawning underneath completely bereft her of the power to descend. She fluttered impotent as a leaf of autumn, some seventy feet in mid air.

It needed not the cry of her despair nor her face of snow

for the horrified spectator to comprehend that a paralysis had overtaken her. As she swung and swayed outwards into space it looked that any moment she would grow too faint to retain her hold, and that she would be cast dead at his feet. The dreadful imminence of her danger had the effect of restoring his presence of mind. Porter was no athlete, but he had an all-powerful intelligence. He cried out to her in great confident tones of reassurance—

"Hold on a minute, and I will come to you."

That was the beginning of a struggle between life and death. The first fact that penetrated the consciousness of the young man was that to climb up the tower directly from the mound of earth on which he stood was impossible. He must go to the farther end of the wall, where the ascent to the coping was comparatively easy to an active person. Porter could not call himself that, but under the goad of fear he clambered up to the top of the wall as quickly as another. Once there he had to proceed along the narrow and, to him, unnerving parapet that led to the base of the tower. He could not trust himself to walk across it, therefore he went down on all-fours, and made his precarious way upon his hands and knees. This mode was much the surer, although it cut the palms of his hands and pierced the knees of his trousers.

The wretched girl was still clinging half senseless to the side of the tower by the time Porter found himself beneath it. She hung now some fifty feet above him; he had the peculiar physical awkwardness that nature inflicts upon the thinker; the innate physical cowardice which is the penalty of the imaginative gift; his heart beat cruelly; his breast rose and fell in the painful effort to procure breath; the sweat leapt out of every pore; his limbs were as paper; and yet if the child was not incontinently to be dashed in pieces without his lifting a finger for her deliverance, he would be compelled to swing his leaden bulk into space, and ascend the sheer face of the tower.

He did not hesitate. In an obscure fashion he realized the grim significance of the adage, "He who hesitates is lost." An instant for reflection; an instant for reason to approve, for commonsense to sanction, and his effort would not be made. A moment's tarrying while he reviewed his

so grievous physical limitations and the appalling magnitude of the task and the creature would be dead upon the green ground. He was content with a single idea: If she, a child, can climb up there, I, Alfred Porter, can climb there too.

It came over the young man even in the moment he took his resolve that his flesh, his brain, his nerves had the consistency of pap; but the indomitable will was stronger in him than the clay. He forced himself to rise from his bleeding hands and knees, attacked the crevices before him with his feet and made a convulsive clutch at the moss and ivy above his head. He raised himself up with his one idea. Mechanically he began to draw his body up the cliff-like surface, precisely in the fashion which five minutes before had been revealed to him while the blood ran cold in his veins. He would have had no idea as to the manner in which he should attempt the climb had the means been left to his own invention. But he had seen Delia gripping with her fingers and thrusting at the ivy with her feet. He found himself doing the same, by the mechanical force of imitation. Immediately he found his toes running into nooks capable of affording foothold, and his hands cleaving to roots sufficiently tenacious to support his weight. It was then borne in upon him that he was ascending into space with surprising rapidity and miraculous ease. It seemed no more difficult, no more precarious than ascending a ladder. Like many another act of hardihood, it was the inception that made the supreme demand. Resolution is the talisman: It is the gathering of the reluctant forces, the making up of the mind in the face of the protest of reason, the determination to flout Failure's mocking assurances that taxes the Trojan energies. Once launched upon the grim enterprise, and the sensibility to risk is merged in the overmastering physical effort, in the sudden splendid lust to achieve.

Porter's first steps had been involuntary. But finding himself borne onwards and upwards so lightly, so easily, a rare sense of exhilaration was kindled in him. The sporting instinct asserted itself in his pulses for the first time in his life. And with it came that intrepid *insouciance* which is the hallmark and the birthright of the born sports-

man, which he exhibits in the crises of the games he happens to be playing: the leader of cavalry recovering the guns; the foxhunter taking his own line across a blind country; the three-quarter getting over on the stroke of the clock. His limbs performed their motions instinctively; his whole being was surrendered to an idea. A pair of unstable feet faltered in a niche high above his head. If he burst his heart he would not be able to breathe again until he felt them in his hands.

Moving upwards through space he was conscious of nothing but that. Danger and insecurity did not exist. Flesh and blood, sunlight and green fields did not exist. Time there was not, nor place. At last he was up to her; he was touching the hem of her skirt. Releasing one hand from the ivy, he encircled her tightly with his unencumbered arm. He became superhuman as he did so. At that instant he was suddenly endowed with the strength of Samson and the heroes of fable. Hoarsely he told her to fold her arms round his throat. She obeyed with two little throbbing wrists, as cold as stone.

How they got down alive neither of them could ever say. Afterwards they could only point to the fact that they lived to tell the tale. The descent was a marvellous business, but that was a moment when our young man wielded marvellous qualities. He carried the talisman in his spirit that performs the miracles of which we read. Your one idea men; your men who have the capacity to resolve their souls in their desires seldom fail. Porter was surrendered wholly to the gods of his enormous resolution, and step by step they brought him and the shivering cowering burden that he carried in complete safety to the coping of the wall.

"I am all right now, I can walk now," said Delia faintly, the moment her feet touched solid bricks and mortar.

"You are sure?" he said, allowing her to slide off his shoulders on to it.

Finding herself on familiar territory, she made an effort to regain her self-possession and was able to do so. Almost directly the clear tone of her voice advised her deliverer of the fact, and he allowed her to make her own practised way along the parapet to the far end of the wall where the

descent to mother earth was easiest. He laboured after her in the decidedly less dignified and less comfortable fashion in which he had crossed it before.

When the green earth at last received them again, Porter's first act was to prostrate himself at full length and bury his face in the grass. For about a minute he lay mute and panting like a dog, and then began to sob hysterically. Directly afterwards the agitated creature bending over him was terrified to find that he was become insensible. She pulled him by the shoulder but he gave no sign. She called his name, but he made no answer. She knelt down at his side, and tried to raise him up, but putting forth all her little strength she found he did not yield. Great was her alarm, but she managed to retain her presence of mind. She remembered that a clear stream of water babbled over stones at the bottom of the hill. Running down to it as fast as she could, she took off her straw hat, and filled the crown of it with water. To return with this specific up the steep incline was not easy, but so quick and delicate was she of foot, that, without spilling a drop of it, she was back at the side of her friend in quite a short time.

To her immense relief she discovered him to be sitting up with his head resting against the ruin. He was very pale.

"Water," he gasped at the sight of her bearing it gravely in front of her.

She gave the hat to him with a still greater gravity. He drank greedily.

"Ha!" he said, drawing a deep breath, "how good!"

"Can you ever forgive me?" said Delia, very white and frightened.

He looked unflinchingly upon her distress.

"I don't know that you deserve to be forgiven," he said, with a deliberation that made her wince.

"You *will* forgive me," she said, very near to tears.

"It was incredibly foolish. Tell me what devil it was that possessed you."

She burst into tears.

"You might have been killed," she said.

"And you?"

"I wish I had been," she said bitterly.

Her distress was rather painful in its realness, but he kept his pity under control.

"You must tell me what made you do it."

Delia's face burnt with shame.

"I am waiting," he said.

Finding him as implacable as ever, and herself as completely under his dominion here as in all things since she had known him, she prepared to submit. She would have bitten off her tongue rather than make the confession he was forcing out of her. But there was no help for it. As he sat there with his deadly pale face, the knees of his trousers cut, and blood visible on the palms of his hands, he was as inexorable as the piece of stone against which he leant. Trembling violently, she stifled her tears, and gathered every crumb of her resolution. After all, like her sisters', hers was a sufficiently Spartan character.

"I knew myself to be despicable," she said, not flinching from her punishment now she was called on to undergo it, nor sparing herself a single stroke of humiliation, "in almost all things compared with you. But when you were so much out of breath coming up the hill, it made me glad to think there was just one thing, however silly and small it was, in which I should not have to acknowledge myself beaten. I thought it would be delightful to let you see I was not altogether good for nothing, and that there were some things I could do. This is the consequence."

But his compassion was still withheld. His attitude was not what she had been led to look for in one so kind.

"I deserve my fate," she said humbly. "I deserve it all."

"It may be salutary."

"I shall never be vainglorious again," said the child.

"Suppose we try to forget?"

"You will forgive me."

"There is nothing to forgive, as far as I am concerned personally, although you did juggle with two lives I esteem. The real offence was committed against yourself."

"But you are angry with me."

"No. It may hurt me a little to find you acting unworthily. I have not passed it over lightly, even at the risk of being a prig who ought to be kicked, because you

have a character that is worth taking a few risks over. Had you been of another sex, I am not sure that it would not have been my painful duty to emphasize what I mean in the robust English fashion."

By now amusement had softened his eyes.

Delia struggled against a renewal of her tears.

"How stupid and foolish I must seem!" she said bitterly. "How weak you must think me! I do try so hard not to be, and yet the more I try the more hopeless do I become. You seem so strong and sure. Everything you do seems to be wise and right, while I do nothing but expose my folly. I wish you had not come up to me at all. I wish you had let me stay there and kill myself!"

Delia stamped her foot, and again the tears appeared. She was a woman who saw herself degraded in the eyes of one whose poor opinion was unendurable.

"I suppose when the truth comes out," she went on, "you can ride better than I, although you told me you had never mounted a horse in your life."

"Or stand on my head better, or play cricket better," said he, laughing.

"No, I don't mean it like that," said poor Delia. "It is because everything you do inflicts me so much with my own weakness. You know I began by hating you; and I am afraid I shall end by hating you. It does make me so miserable."

"We must learn not to underrate ourselves," said her friend with great simplicity. He could see now how overcome she was by what had happened, and felt the necessity of being more gentle. "We creatures of moods suffer intensely; none but ourselves know what we suffer; but we must learn to be strong, we must learn not to yield. In time we may think of ourselves much less meanly."

"But others will not."

"If we strive ever to be brave we shall cease to care what others think of us. The opinion of others about ourselves ought not to count. Our own minds are the highest tribunals before which we can be brought. Those are the only courts that can weigh the mass of evidence."

"It is easy for you to disregard the opinion of others, you who are so powerful, so self-reliant, but you do not

know how difficult it is for me. I have no confidence in myself at all. I—I am not like you and my sister Joan. You have strong characters that never falter, and go right always. I—I don't know which way to turn or what to do!"

Sobs broke out of the distressed little creature, and in her despair she covered her eyes. No words from her friend, however wise, however solicitous, were able to soften the sense of inferiority by which she was overpowered. Why she should be suffering so acutely at that moment he did not know. Far was he from suspecting that his own too-potent personality was the cause. The knowledge that she was humiliated in his eyes had overborne her. She felt it would not be possible to hold up her head any more. She was disgraced for ever in the eyes of him whose fair opinion she valued above that of all the world.

Recognizing at last how hopeless was the task of healing her wounded self-esteem, her companion rose from his tussock of earth, and suggested that they should retrace their steps to the house. Little passed between them as they went. It was too plain that Delia had surrendered herself to the luxury of being miserable. Mis-reading the main cause of her unhappiness, he was inclined to believe that her present mood would be medicinal. The cast of his mind was naturally not lenient. He could not help feeling that her recent conduct merited severe retribution. She was engaged now in meting it out to herself, and he could hardly bring himself to deplore that she suffered under it so intensely.

Her distress gave him an even finer sense of her delicacy than he had had before. Such a fragility could easily bruise. Evidently women were fearfully and wonderfully made, although to be sure this frail little thing could hardly be called a woman yet. He found himself speculating on her fate as he walked beside her. The spectre of the average man rose again before his eyes. Too palpably was she the pre-destined victim of some rough and ready, eminently well-meaning savage. He pitied her profoundly. Poor little devil, some honest rogue would see to it that she bled!

He left her in the drive. She stood wistfully to watch his insignificant figure recede out of sight among the trees. She then turned her steps towards a thicket which lay beyond a lawn behind the house. Penetrating to the heart of it, she flung herself upon her face beneath a great tree, and wept the bitterest tears she had ever shed.

CHAPTER XX

Preparations for Comedy

ALL this time our leading comic female personage was gathering her forces for what lay before her. She rejoiced, as you know, in the dual endowment of courage and wisdom. The nature of the calamity that had fallen upon her was a tax upon them both. It is a pity that the conjunction of these qualities is not a purer source of gratification. The presence of the one too often implies the necessity for the other. Wisdom involves a full measure of clear sight; a capacity to look around and ahead. Courage, on the other hand, is required to support such a bold proceeding. Under the glare of the cold light of reason, or the spell of a sage anticipation, it does not get a fair chance. A martyr would hardly consent to walk to the stake if he were not convinced of the immortality of the soul.

Mrs. Broke recognized acutely the fatal nature of her son's act. She believed that as a family they lived in a moment when every ounce of social prestige they could scrape together must be utilized to keep their heads above the stream. They had enemies. There would be no lack of volunteers for the agreeable duty of performing the happy dispatch. There were persons only too anxious, too willing, to undertake the humane office of inserting a piece of lead in their shoes, so that once in the water they might "go down to Davy Jones" in the most effectual manner. You cannot be powerful and exclusive, and have a reputation for arrogance without being encumbered with friends of this kind. Wherever there is a dying lion the jackals gather.

However, in the stoicism of her spirit she did not flinch from the *coup de grâce* of the outside world so much as another might have done. She valued power not so much as a mere possession, but rather for what it could do. The grave difficulties, when all was said, rose in her domestic circle. Turning the matter over in her mind during the watches of the night, she had to make the confession that, allowing for all the inestimable advantages her courage and wisdom conferred upon her, there was one point in which she went in terror of that simple hearty mediaevalist, her husband.

She had made a comprehensive and exhaustive study of that immaculate gentleman. In any given situation she was tolerably sure of how he would act. She had made an inventory of his character and ideas. But there were just two clauses in it that foreshadowed the gravity of the issue at present besetting him. Sense of humour, *nil*; Pride, the algebraic figure, *x*. This eternal unknown quantity baffled her. That apart he stood forth a lusty beef-eating, beer-drinking British farmer; a consummately amenable animal, provided you did not keep him waiting for his meals. Up to that point he was as simple, as honest as a horse; up to that point his emotional system had been tabulated with a highly sagacious nicety. But this pride of his, this survival of other ages in him, was different. Its depths had not been plumbed. They were a little terrible, a little legendary. And they derived an additional reputation for profundity owing to their limpidity of surface.

Sleeping and awake, the problem gave her no peace. The longer she put off the evil hour, the more difficult it grew. It was imperative that all should be confessed without delay, lest he find out by other means. It was unlike her to shirk an ordeal, but in this matter again and again was she confronted by her vacillation. She would go to bed with the determination hot upon her to tell him the first thing in the morning. She would rise with the resolution to tell him immediately after luncheon. She would dress for dinner, and vow to tell him the last thing before retiring. She began to grow a little despicable in her own eyes. Such weakness was no part of her character.

Miss Wayling also was a person whom it was vital to consider; Common equity forbade delay; In this case the task did not daunt her, although she was keenly desirous to spare her all avoidable pain. To this end she waited until Billy's wife and her aunt, Miss Sparrow, had been installed quietly in the small cottage on the hill. She made no secret of their coming. She took an early opportunity of saying—

"Two very dear people in whom I am interested are coming to live in the old empty cottage on the hill. You have had no one for it, Edmund, since old Duffin the gardener died. It might as well be occupied as lie idle and rot."

On a gracious morning of spring when the rapturously happy women from the purlieus of Hampden Road had been housed in their new abode, Mrs. Broke made a journey up the hill to see them. She had Miss Wayling to accompany her. The discreet woman felt that if the girl was allowed the opportunity of viewing aunt and niece with perfectly disinterested eyes, the impression she was likely to bear away would stand her in good stead when she received the blow that unwittingly they were condemned to deal her.

Upon their return, consciously refreshed in spirit by a walk bathed in sweet airs and the scent of the young spring flowers, they talked without reserve. It was not the least of Mrs. Broke's gifts that no one could long inhabit the zone of her energetic gaze without revealing much that a less strenuous intelligence would have been content to overlook. She had become one of the few, the singularly few, who could be said to have an insight into the nature of Miss Wayling. To the adulating mob which formed her world she passed as cold, proud, formal, and exclusive, a person with whom it was neither a light task nor a pleasant to have to do. Mrs. Broke went deeper. Her habit of minute observation had enabled her to form a humaner estimate. In her dealings with the world she might not be particularly scrupulous, but she loved her son too tenderly to sacrifice wantonly his happiness for a mess of pottage. She now felt that having taken the precaution to mitigate the blow as far as lay in her power, she could

deal it with a moderately definite knowledge of the manner in which it would be accepted.

"What did you think of my pensioners, my dear Maud?" she said, in the privacy of her own room. "Are they not charming? Are they not wholly delightful, single-minded, and fresh?"

"They are, indeed," said Miss Wayling, with a little more animation in her eyes than was usual. "Oh, if one could only be like them! It nearly overcame me to see them so happy. I think Alice is the fairest, sweetest creature I have ever seen."

"And the old aunt?"

"The old aunt is a dear. That sweet, old-fashioned curtsey! And the way her voice shook when she so timidly gave you the handful of flowers she had picked out of the garden. I would like to steal half of them if I may. And that beautiful haunted old face that seems almost frightened to find itself so happy."

"They are very moving and beautiful. There is hardly a name for such a surpassing simplicity. I should say it is even more difficult for people like ourselves to achieve such a simplicity as that than it is for the rich man to achieve the kingdom of heaven."

"Not forgetting the rich woman," said Miss Wayling, with a wan laugh.

"True, my poor child!"

"But these dear people *do* seem to have achieved it."

"Yes; I think they have after long intolerable years of misery. But I took you to see them because there is a story, a rather remarkable story, I want to tell you. It involves us both; but however and in what manner we may be disposed to resent the outrage of our own personal feelings, I can only pray that we spare one another. What you will suffer, I shall suffer too. We shall be a pair of lacerated women. I only pray that in our torment we do not turn and rend each other."

The dramatic change in the voice of the elder woman startled the girl. Every word was charged with meaning. Yet she could not conceive how the two poor women at the cottage could have a tragic bearing on her life. Mrs. Broke did not allow her perplexity to remain unresolved. Briefly

she outlined the lamentable history. She took the girl's shrinking hands in her own.

" I do not ask you to forgive him," she said, " but in the name of that wretched innocent whom we have seen this morning, I ask you to pardon him."

" There is nothing for me to forgive; there is nothing for me to pardon," said Miss Wayling, in a voice that was devoid of a trace of passion. " From the first he did not care for me. I was conscious of that. And if he ever showed me any favour—and I cannot recall that he ever did—it was never more than a formal and tardy concession to circumstances. I had come to see all that lately."

" Ah, but you, my dear, poor, brave child! "

Mrs. Broke held the cold shrinking fingers firmer. With a sudden effort the girl drew them away, and turned them desolately against her heart. Her white face had become pinched; her cheeks had fallen in.

" I wanted but this," she said, in a voice that had grown metallic in its hardness. " I, the despised, the rejected of women, have my mockery complete! I knew from the first I could not hold him; I knew I could not draw him to me; I felt myself to be repelling him, as I repel all the people that I care for. Never was a fate more bitter and perverse. Either I am fawned upon by a host of parasites, or I am shunned because of the distaste I breed in those whom I long to call my friends. I knew I should lose him! The last time I saw him there was something here in my heart that told me he could never be mine."

In the first overwhelming anguish of the girl's position Mrs. Broke made no attempt to console. She had judged shrewdly as to the manner in which it would be received. The pangs of wounded self-love were stinging her beyond endurance. There are no half-courses with such natures. Perhaps it is only once or twice in a lifetime that their pride will allow them to utter a complaint. And when bleeding and excoriated past all suffering it does, no voice crying in the wilderness can sound more wailfully to human ears! Mrs. Broke, hearing it, was harrowed by it. She understood its meaning. There were fibres in that sensitive organism being wrenched out by the roots.

" The last time we met," she went on, " I could see he

meant to get free. And if I had not been so selfish I should have made it easier for him. If I had not been so absorbed in myself he would have been helped to a release. But I could not do it; I am not of the clay that is capable of self-sacrifice. The effect I have had on his sisters has only been the reflection of that I have had on him. From the first they have shunned me and distrusted me, as all really nice people do. There are so many people who are not nice at all who court me because of my unfortunate position, that it makes indifference from people I would like to be my friends so much harder to bear. Perhaps it is because I am so weary of everything, so weary of my gilded cage, that I am thrown back upon the contemplation of myself. I know I devote too much thought to myself. I am doing so now, I know I am, when, dear Mrs. Broke, I ought to be thinking of you. After all, it falls so very much harder on you. How *do* you bear it! I do feel for you, dear Mrs. Broke. How good and brave you are!"

The elder woman received her in her arms, and kissed her like a mother.

"I at least understand you, my poor, poor child," she said. "And if you were stung to make these confidences oftener you would be more happy. It does not pay for us women to be too reserved. It is not always wise to wait until a supreme moment compels us to expose the thoughts that have gathered in our hearts. They may congeal so easily if we do not relieve them now and then. It is noble of you to accept this blow so stedfastly; I am sure it makes my task so much less full of pain."

They remained a long time together, offering to each other a consolation that helped them to forget their private torment. It is said their sex can be supremely tender when their suffering is on a common ground; when eye to eye they look upon the gashes the same beloved object has dealt with his impartial steel. In such cases, they have nothing to fear from one another when they show their wounds.

From that hour Mrs. Broke nerved herself anew for the greater task. It grew each day; each day increased the guilt of her connivance.

"It is imperative that I should tell Mr. Broke," she con-

fessed to Maud Wayling; "but you do not know how fearful I am, how afraid!"

"Surely, dear Mrs. Broke, delay is dangerous. To-morrow the task will be still harder; and if he made the discovery himself he might not find it so easy to forgive."

"If he made the discovery himself he would not forgive. I know him only too well. And as it is, I fear he will never forgive our poor boy. There are points on which I have known men to be implacable."

The unhappy women were seen to shiver before one another's eyes.

CHAPTER XXI

In which our First Comedian makes his Bow before an appreciative Audience

IN the course of that afternoon Mrs. Broke took the plunge under the spur of necessity. She could no longer afford to run the risk of the secret leaking out. She was too familiar with her husband's Draconian cast to continue to incur so great a danger. She must away with all cowardice, lest she should be implicated in her son's act.

Broke, as usual, entered the library wearily, under protest, to engage as he believed in a futile discussion of their financial state.

"Money, money, money!" he said, sinking, as was his wont during these periods of boredom, into his customary chair at the side of the fire.

"Something new," said Mrs. Broke, "and something worse."

Her brevity was electrical. Broke sat up suddenly, galvanised by her tone.

"I—ah, can hardly conceive anything worse than our need of money, our attempts to make bricks without straw."

"Try," said the laconic woman.

"That fellow has not been playing tricks?"

"Your guess is excellent."

"They have not—ah, fallen out?"

"No; but Billy has married another."

Broke's shout rang through the room like the firing of a shot.

Her brevity was calculated. She had carefully thought out beforehand the most fitting manner in which to tell him. Expedience was hardly ever divorced from that inexorably sagacious mind, even in moments of severe affliction. She had come to see that in this case, all attempts at breaking the news, all verbiage, all the sugar to coat the bitter pill, would not only fail of its effect, but would have a tendency to aggravate. Your bluntly-honest characters demand a perpetual exhibition of that quality in others. Flummery is not for them.

To Broke's shout of amazement his wife responded with the perfectly calm lustre of her eyes.

"D—do you know what you are saying, woman?"

"Edmund," she said, "you may find it the least bit premature to trumpet your astonishment in this tremendous key. It may result in anti-climax. Because you have yet to hear the worst. Billy is not only married, but he is married to a person who has not a penny; a person he was good enough to take out of Perkin and Warbeck's shop in Bond Street. He took her from the counter."

Our hero rose out of his chair. He proceeded to stagger up and down the large room with both hands pressed tightly against the sides of his head. He was as one suffering the pangs of a splitting neuralgia or an excruciating toothache.

"Impossible, impossible!" he said at intervals.

His wife did not utter a syllable until this paroxysm was over. It is useless to ask a man to be calm the moment a nerve has been torn out by the roots. She stood perfectly still, and waited for the first dire pinches of his agony to pass. She stood with the inscrutable, the impartial countenance with which Juno may look on at the frenzies of Jupiter.

"Can you bear the details, Edmund?" she said at last.

"I don't know," he said in an impotent voice.

In a few succinct phrases, unsoftened to that wounded understanding, untuned to those devastated ears, she gave the salient facts, in so far as she was acquainted with them. She concluded her recital in these words—

"Edmund, here is the outline of the affair as it exists,

We are ruined and mocked; do not let us conceal those facts from ourselves; but, acting on a true conception of our position, I would ask you to display wisdom as well as fortitude. You will, Edmund, I am sure, do the right thing."

He stopped a moment in his peregrination of the room, but his reply was inarticulate.

"I ask you, Edmund, to give me your shoulder. I suffer as intensely as you. We cannot piece together that which is broken; we cannot undo that which is done; but mitigate the consequences of this disaster we can and must. I have already taken them into my consideration, and stand persuaded that we shall serve our interests privately and as a family by being just. Suffer as we may, we must not fail in our first duty. We must give this wretched tool of Providence the sanction of our recognition."

She breathed heavily as she spoke these words. They were not easy to utter. Stoical she might be, but they galled her cruelly. Broke lifted his chin in perplexity.

"I can't understand," he said dully.

Our sagacious lady, in the midst of the anguish that was shaking her, showed him a half-humorous gleam of teeth.

"I appreciate your difficulty. But I see the duty which lies before you, and I cannot too earnestly entreat you to perform it. You may agree with me, Edmund, or you may not, but I am persuaded that in all circumstances our duty, however irksome, indicates the path along which is to be found our highest personal welfare. However you may be moved to visit your resentment upon Billy—and as his mother and with my heart bleeding I am the first to admit that he has incurred it—I ask you to use perfect equity in your dealings with his wife. I am looking ahead."

"You are talking, woman, as though you were insane!"

In her husband's present state of mental anarchy she saw it would be futile to proceed. She fell back upon silence, therefore. But she continued to regard him with a self-possession that had a considerable degree of pity in it. He was still walking up and down in his rather sorry

manner. He was bewildered. He kept clutching at his head, as if he desired to pluck out with his two hands the jagged thoughts that were ploughing it in furrows. In their present shape he could not endure them. It was as though he wished to lift them bodily from that setting which had overthrown his brain, denude them of their flesh and blood, and hold them up before his eyes as cold and sober documents printed in large type.

"I am only—ah—just making myself—ah—begin to realize the meaning of all that you say," he said at last, with a change of tone which his wife found very welcome, for it implied that a measure of reason had returned. "It sounds so unnatural at first that it rather knocks you down. Do you think the fellow is mad?"

"In a sense I do; but it is not the sort of madness you could prove before a jury."

"It is such a cruel, cold-blooded, selfish thing to do as far as we are concerned. He has not thought of us at all."

"We must not blame him for that altogether," said the mother of his son. "We ourselves are also a little to blame there. I am afraid from the first we got into a habit of giving him too free a hand."

"Yes, perhaps you are right. And so in the end it brings him to this!"

"I have quite lately come to see that men of his type need to be trained with unfaltering care if they are to prove the equal of their responsibilities. It has been our poor boy's misfortune to be born into a class which has found it perfectly easy to pander to its lusts for many hundreds of years. And it has an hereditary appetite also, because as a consequence it has become the most self-indulgent class in the world."

"I deny that," said the hardened aristocrat vehemently.

His wife expected that he would, and indeed had spoken with intention. After the first shock of the wound she saw the need of administering an anaesthetic to lull the subsequent agony. Any small diversion from the immediate matter that was racking him to pieces would be a charity.

"You may deny it, Edmund, but I do not think you will be able to disprove it. One shudders to recall the

host of impartial witnesses one could put in evidence against us."

"There are no impartial witnesses in our case. Those who are not on our level would always pull us down."

"Why?"

"Because—ah—they do not like us."

"My dear Edmund, has it not struck you that they may have reasons, very excellent reasons, for not liking us? There is not a lust, not a whim, which place and power have enabled us to gratify, that we have scrupled to gratify at their expense. Are we not one and all brought up on the dogma that the world is to ourselves and our kindred? Do not we in turn imbue our children with it? Do we ever hesitate, I ask you, Edmund, to abuse our privileges to gain our ends? Come what may, everything is for the best in the best of all possible worlds, so long as we dine off silver plate. All is well, provided we do not defile the sources whence we obtain our purple and fine linen! They may well not like our idleness, our arrogance, our *laissez faire*, our complete insensibility to any interests outside our own."

"I have not the patience to listen. You—ah—*annoy* me. You might be one of those orators in Hyde Park. I will not believe we are so bad as that. If we are, how have we got our position and how have we kept it for so long?"

"We have never found it very easy to keep, Edmund; and perhaps you will admit we are not finding it easy now. And I suspect in the first place we did not find it very easy to come by; and the means by which we did come by it might not strike us as particularly nice if revealed at the present time."

"Why—ah—this Radical Socialist talk?"

"My eyes have been unsealed a little of late. If you, Edmund, could have come with me to the noisome place in the north of London in which these poor women have lived their lives; if you could have heard them talk with perfect candour of the squalor, hardship and disease to which they have been bred, to which generations of their forbears have been bred before them; if, Edmund, you could have seen the expression on their faces, it might

have unsealed your eyes too. Not again am I going to permit myself a judgment of people of this sort. It is a convenient and a natural thing for us to lay their misfortunes to their own doors; but when we do so, Edmund, we are guilty of injustice, and we ought to be made to pay for it. Their privations are no more the fruit of their essential viciousness than our luxuries and privileges are the fruits of our essential excellence. I say it might have unsealed your eyes, Edmund; and, pondering over it and meditating on it, I have almost come to believe that it is a tardy act of justice on the part of the god, Circumstance, ironical ruffian that he is! which has caused our ruin to be identified with these unhappy creatures who have suffered at the hands of us and our like these many hundreds of years."

"You—ah—mean to say he ruined his people because of—ah—such fantastical notions as these?"

Broke flung up his head and snuffed the air.

"I repeat, Edmund, that I am not sure that we do not deserve to be ruined. I am not sure that it is not just that all persons such as we have proved ourselves to be should not ultimately go to the wall. As a body we have done less than nothing to justify our existence. We may on occasion have strenuously opposed projects of amelioration and enlightenment for our weaker brethren, but, as far as I can observe, I do not think we have gone beyond that."

"Good God, woman, this is cant, Radical cant! If we have not been the backbone of this country, if we have not kept it together, and shall do again, I would ask, who has done and will?"

"The classes below us, whom it generally suits our purpose to ignore—the workers, the thinkers, the traders, the people who must eat their bread in the sweat of their brows."

"You—ah—should go into Parliament as the—ah—representative of Labour."

He had man's contempt for the polemical faculty of woman. He could allow her a free hand to deal with the minutiae of daily life. He could even admit that nature had fitted her sex to cope with small things, for were they not in keeping with the feminine order of mind? But on

really large affairs, on political questions, on questions of precedent and tradition, she must not be permitted to hold an opinion. No woman, however wise in her way, could be trusted there. If any better illustration of that incontrovertible truth could be furnished than his wife's attitude towards the marriage of her son, and her advocacy of socialism and democracy in order to justify it, he should be grateful to be shown it.

"This is what you women do," he said. "You find a grain of something that you—ah—persuade yourselves is truth, and you make a peck of nonsense out of it. Let us have no more of it, please!"

Mrs. Broke gave him no more for the time being. She was not sure that she had spoken with any depth of conviction. There had been an ulterior motive underlying her argument, which at least in a measure it might be said to have fulfilled. Mercifully it had diverted his mind from the calamity assailing it. And if the tempest of his anger could be divorced for the time being from the subject that had called it forth, there was the hope, perhaps too slender to be named, that the first furious force of it might pass.

By nature, however, he was a man with a great power of resentment. In the metaphor of his brother-in-law, "he was a stayer." He could brood upon a private wrong. And by taking thought his sense of outrage was not likely to grow less. When one of his few primary ideas was touched he was indeed formidable. Reason could not reach him then. The tenderest or most burning appeal would leave him as stone. And if it seemed necessary to arm his heart against the first object of its affection, he was the man for the deed. He could be very hard, very pitiless at the dictation of justice.

At dinner that evening the first evidence occurred of his drastic temper. The girls were talking across the table among themselves, and the name of their brother, which was oftener on their lips perhaps than any other, was being freely interchanged.

"Joan," said their father, in a tone that was to dwell in their ears for evermore, "oblige me by never mentioning that name again when I am present."

The startled creatures shot bewildered glances at one another, and then at their mother. There was the blankest stupefaction in their faces; but their mother replied to them with the peculiar inscrutability that was hers always. As usual she was a closed book, of which not a line could be read. But the blow had fallen from the hand of one who was a friend, a comrade; from the hand of one whose natural accessibility rendered it tragic. He had never used such a tone to them before. It was terrible. It probably distressed them more than he was aware; a single word from him had the power to lacerate Even as it was he saw their startled scarlet faces, and his overweening tenderness for them came to their aid.

"Something has happened," he said less harshly. "You—ah—must get your mother to explain it to you."

Again they turned their covert glances to their mother, but her face was masked with a meek smile.

Afterwards, in privacy, husband and wife sat late into the night. Broke, with a premeditation unusual in him, waited until he had dined, with the aid of a bottle of sound claret, before he put forth the attempt to enter into definite dealings with the matter. He wished to gird himself in the security of a right and reasonable mind. He wanted to grapple with the thing, to look all round it before he acted; and when act he did he felt it must not be said that he was moved to do so in a moment of passion or imperfect sanity.

Upon taking thought he sat down after dinner and composed a letter with compressed lips. He composed it with a slowness and a deliberation of spirit that sealed the doom of himself as well as that of his son. The sounding of the last trump could not have been more final. It was a bitter and unworthy production, but mercifully short. There was not a word in it that a father is not entitled to employ to his offspring; not a word, not a phrase, encroached beyond the bald truth and the dictates of politeness; but the tone was vigour without warmth, brutality without vehemence. It was absolutely frigid and unemotional; in it the furiously outraged pride of the writer was cloaked less effectually than he thought.

In effect he informed him that, in consideration of his

recent act, he was his son no more except in name. He regretted it was not in his power to denude him of that sole identification of what he had been formerly. Had it been possible he would have done so, since he had been at such pains to prove his unfitness for the custody of so high and fair a thing. He proceeded to pass a sentence of banishment. His act had put him outside the pale of his friends; irrevocably it had cut him off from his kind. Not again was he to set foot in that house; his name was not to be spoken in it; and on the understanding that he was not to attempt the contamination of his sisters, and that he did not prejudice his family by appearances in the neighbourhood, he was to be in receipt of two hundred pounds a year. It was suggested that he should obtain an exchange from his present regiment of the Household Cavalry to a less expensive branch of the service at the earliest opportunity, as under no circumstances would the sum in question be augmented. Sacrifices had formerly been made to maintain him in a state of decency. Since he had now ceased to have a regard for decency, they would be discontinued. He was also to understand that even the sum of two hundred pounds a year was provisional. It was in the power of his future conduct to forfeit it. The writer went the length of conveying a not very obscure hint to the effect that this allowance, meagre as it was, would not have been made had there been another bearer of his name in the male line to perpetuate it.

Mrs. Broke read this unfortunate production with a flushed face and a very odd expression. When she had finished she stood a moment irresolutely looking at her husband.

"Fortunately, you cannot send it to-night. It is well that you will be able to sleep upon it."

"I do not give another thought to it."

"Not to do so will be very injudicious."

"I cannot agree with you. No amount of reflection would lead me to alter a word. It quite expresses what I wish to say."

"But it is irrevocable."

"It is intended to be."

The mother laid her hand on his arm.

"You cannot mean that," she said, with a frightened look in her eyes. "I do not think you realize what it means."

"He will," said the father coldly.

"You cannot realize how wrong, how inhuman it is!"

"It may or it may not be as you say, but I fancy as far as our peace of mind is concerned, we shall do well to consider the matter closed once and for all. We close it now with your permission."

"I do not give it, I cannot give it!" said the mother a little wildly.

Broke sealed the letter carefully without offering a reply. His wife took him by the arm.

"I feel sure you do not appreciate all that is involved," she said, turning her scared face up to him. "He is all you have left."

"Had I another I would not contribute a farthing to his maintenance."

The mother flushed.

"You speak like a savage," she said, strangling a groan.

The mask of inscrutability she wore habitually was in danger of falling from her.

"You cannot do it, Edmund," she said in a rather thin voice. "It will cost too much. There is no other. Think what it means."

Broke presented a stony disregard. His gesture, or rather his absence of gesture, was outlined to suggest that he was already a little weary. Exhibitions of emotion and that kind of neurotic display were apt soon to become tiresome. But give Jane her due, she was not in the habit of indulging in them.

"Edmund. I beseech you to listen"—there was a note of terror in her voice—"when all is said, he is comparatively a boy, a child. He did not know what he did."

"That is not true," said Broke, with leisurely directness. "He knew what he did, but he did not care. If he did not know what he did, why did he not take daylight to it, like an honest man?"

The mother permitted herself a palpable lie.

"He was thinking of poor Maud," she said, flushing again and turning away her face. "He would have done it openly had not her name been associated with his so publicly. I blame myself for that. He wanted to spare her as much as he could. It is to his credit."

Broke having suppressed a yawn, forced himself to take a renewed interest in the discussion at this original twist to it. He opened his eyes very wide, and his somewhat cruel smile sank into her.

"I—ah—don't believe you," he said. "I—ah—don't believe any of you women. You stick at nothing at a pinch. You have a brief to patch up the best peace you can, and this is how you do it."

"And if I do," said his wife, a little stung.

"Ha, there you go! Now suppose I give you a word of advice. Do not interfere. You cannot understand. You will be wise to close the matter here and now."

It could not be said of Mrs. Broke that she was deficient in spirit. A grim light burnt in her eyes. It generally portended mischief, as her daughters were so well aware.

"When will you understand, Edmund," she said with a calmness that was memorable, "that you are not a mediaeval baron living in the eleventh century. You must please forget your lance and your poleaxe, and remember this is a civilised age."

She was beginning to feel that she was in imminent danger of losing her temper. The tactician was already merged in the woman and the mother. But she knew that the moment she did so she might at once renounce her cause. To lead Broke was possible under some conditions, but any attempt at force must mean disaster. The instant she set up her own indomitable will against his she must be overthrown, for granting that they were of an equal calibre, the man's inalienable prerogative still remained to him of knocking her down.

Once again she had to make the admission that he was a terrible creature when his blood was up. The survival of the savage in him made it no woman's work to tackle him. Moral suasion and the mysterious attribute of sex, her chief weapons in our elder civilisation for her dealings with the monster, had little sway with these brute natures;

She might make tacit appeals to his sense of chivalry; but they are likely to be disregarded by your savage animal when his blood is up. She might be incomparable in finesse; accomplished in thrust and parry work; but these mediaevalists had a tendency to ride into battle swinging heavier weapons. The rapier of the wittiest woman that ever lived is of no avail in the *cap à pie* style of fighting,

She was conscious of a great anguish rising like a flood in her heart. To her whose life had been a long victory over emotion, such a sense of its power filled her with horror. If she lost her self-mastery now, her son was doomed; yet never had it been so hard to retain.

"You don't understand," was his reply to the most piercing of her appeals. "You can't be made to understand. I—ah—daresay it is because you are his mother. I—ah—presume there must be something wrong-headed and irrational in being a mother. Take my advice and say no more."

"I cannot; believe me, Edmund, I cannot."

Her voice failed suddenly. For the first time Broke saw a tear. It was not easy for her to weep. Tears of hers had to be distilled drop by drop out of her unyielding spirit. Broke was shocked. He had a reverential tenderness for her, deep down. She was very dear to him; she was a part of himself. He took her cold hand.

"You must bear up, old girl," he said. "I know it is a facer for you, but you—ah—must try to keep a stiff upper lip. You don't understand, and it is no good my trying to make you. But it is a facer for me too—a devil of a facer. I hope—ah—you will do me that justice?"

Our hero fetched a groan.

"I do, I do," said his wife. "If I did not I would not urge you to reflect. But when you prepare to strike off your left hand to avenge the misdeeds of your right, I cannot stand by and see you do it."

"It is the sign of our decadence. We only half meet things now. There should be no half measures with those who offend against their race. I would cut off every mother's son."

Despair was beginning slowly to overspread the dogged

spirit. Appeals to his humanity, his paternal instinct, his sense of justice were vain. There was nothing she could do. The indomitable woman made the admission to herself in a sudden grinding spasm of agony. He had got his back against the wall of his unreason, and nothing—nothing could induce him to budge. It made him bleed to see his wife suffer, for at heart there was none more chivalrous, however little it was to be suspected of him. But he was of an unfortunate constitution that enabled him to trace in his own distress a justification for the indulgence of his prejudice. Had he loved his son less and his wife less there would have been a better chance for all. His own personal pain removed the last doubt as to whether he was acting worthily.

"I suffer too," he said; and in that statement he felt the guarantee of a lofty disinterestedness.

Mrs. Broke had one quality, however, that we like to think the first Napoleon attributed to her countrymen. She did not know when to give in. Strand by strand she felt the rope of unreason coiling around her. Hand and foot it was fettering her. It was like a great snake pressing out her life. She could no longer raise a finger to help her son. Broke had sealed the letter, and the light of reason was not in him. A desperation came upon her. The pole-star of her life had been her reticence. In all crises, all dilemmas, that honest guide had lifted her upwards and on. It had been an illimitable source of strength in her combats with the world. It would be so again. But in this, the sharpest pass in which she had ever found herself, it did not count.

That being the case she would do without it. She would cast off its fetters, and see if untrammelled nature could avail.

"Edmund," she said, "it sounds a little theatrical for you and me to refer to the number of years we have pulled together, but you force me to remind you that long as we have, this is the first occasion I have begged a favour. On those grounds I ask you not to send that letter."

Such words, proceeding from those chaste lips, drove a tremor through Broke's unexpressive features. She clutched at it hungrily.

"I have fought your battles, Edmund, for I almost shudder to think how long; I have wrestled with your bitter poverty; I have pared cheese for you that you might still hold on, in the hope of better times; and—and never before to-night have I asked anything in return. And it is a little thing enough, now that I have asked it. Do not tell me, Edmund, that I am asking too much."

"You don't understand, you don't understand," Broke muttered, turning away his face.

"Yes I do, perfectly. Do you suppose you have a monopoly of even a common degree of intelligence? It is your pride, your ungovernable pride, and that only, intervening between us."

Her sudden flare into vehemence seemed to strengthen his hand.

"Put what name you like to it, but the matter is closed," he said, coming back to his air of finality. "And as you choose to call it pride, a man worth his salt has a right to it. A man, if he hasn't it, is not worth the coat to his shoulders."

"Its intrinsic value does not justify one in pandering to it until it becomes a lust."

"That is unjust," said Broke, feeling the barb. "I am as much knocked about as you are—probably more. Do you think it gives me pleasure? He is mine as much as he is yours. He has my name to him. And yet you talk about my pride being a lust. It is the most unfair thing I have ever heard you say. It is not like you."

She had the satisfaction of seeing that she had drawn blood. But she reined herself in tightly. She held her hand although the opportunity was open to her of hitting very hard. Nor was it policy that dictated the act of self-denial. Judge the man as she might, he was her lord, the person for whom she was pledged to entertain the most unequivocal respect, the most unflinching fidelity. Than she, at that moment, her sex could exhibit nothing worthier.

"We will not throw stones at one another," she rejoined in a lower voice. "We are too well acquainted for that. But you must not wonder that I complain when I find myself denied the smallest thing I have a right to look for."

Broke carried her hand to his lips reverently.

"My dear girl," he said huskily, "anything—anything but that. I will give you anything but that. If you feel I am ungrateful ask me for something else. Do you think I don't recognize what you have done for us all—what you have done all these years for me and mine. Do you think I don't know! There is not your like anywhere; and if it could give you pleasure I would go out and shout it in the street. You have been the pilot that has kept us off the rocks all these years. You have been the best, the truest friend man ever had. If you consider me ungrateful, you—ah—wrong me deeply. Come, we will say no more. We are not the people to throw hard names at one another. My God, they hurt!"

"For the first time in our married life, Edmund, I crave a boon of you."

Our first comedian covered his face with his hands for an instant, and when he removed them it had seemed to turn gray.

"I will go down on my knees, Edmund, and crave it."

Our first comedian took away his haggard eyes.

"It is a quarter-past three," he said. "Time we were in bed."

She was trembling violently.

"You deny it to me, Edmund."

"If you will go first," he said, opening the door of the room, "I will turn out the lights."

CHAPTER XXII

The Jumping of the Lesser Wits

FOR several days after the news had been communicated to those whom it most immediately concerned, Mrs. Broke hesitated as to the course she should pursue in regard to others. Her husband and Maud Wayling were the only people who knew at present. So clearly did she foresee the complications that must attend on secrecy that she was keenly desirous that the child at the cottage should be established on the footing which belonged to her position. Of course it would be easy to repudiate her altogether, and in the eyes of many it would be hailed as the only possible course. But nature fitted her to take her place among the strong. Emphatically, she belonged to the category of those who dictate public opinion, not to the larger category of the humble subscribers to it. It would be supremely easy to relegate the wretched child to the limbo from whence she had been so recently evolved. But she saw that as soon as this was done the only hope remaining of a reconciliation between father and son was forfeited.

At the same time if the child's identity was published at once, very little good would be done to her or to Billy, and it would certainly be out of all proportion to the harm that must accrue to them as a family. Not only would it provide a nine days' wonder for the neighbourhood; but tradesmen, the most importunate and easily alarmed race under heaven, might see in it a pretext for pressing their demands. And again, even a resolution that declined to be daunted and a sapience that never slept yet had a tincture

of delicacy. The desire to stave off the dread hour of bankruptcy as long as possible was very real. The innuendo of cause and effect would be too sharp, too indelible, to be borne, even by a woman of the world.

After much taking of thought, Mrs. Broke came to the conclusion that for a time it would be expedient to keep the catastrophe from the public knowledge. She deemed it right, however, or rather politic—and with her policy was the higher form of righteousness—that the girls should know. Their training had been so stern that she felt they could be trusted with a secret which it was vitally necessary to the well-being of all should so remain. Their preceptress saw a terrible object lesson for the dutiful creatures in the gruesome story she had to unfold.

Fright froze their white lips when they heard that brief but fantastic history. To these sophisticated children, raised in a very hot-house of class prejudice, with full many a generation of the spirit it induces wantoning in their veins, the thing was as dreadful, as garish, as ghoul-like as the most inordinate nightmare out of Poe. At first they could accord no more credence to it than if it had been the wildest of all the Arabian Nights' Entertainments. But it hardly called for a moment's reflection to teach them that for once the inconceivable had come to pass. Their mother was the last person in the world likely to regale their minds in such a deplorable manner. Besides, their father's speech at the dinner table at which they had not yet ceased to shiver, still rang in their ears. And for the last three days a strange pinched look had been observed in the white marble face of Miss Wayling.

In their own domain they foregathered to talk with gloomy excitement. Also they would have wept; only, with the exception of Delia, they all had their mother's constitutional frugality in the matter of tears. Compared with the rest Delia was allowed to be a great adept with the waterworks; but this black afternoon, strangely enough, she was the only one who betrayed no disposition to utilize her undoubted abilities in this kind. They even grew a little angry with her indifference on the present occasion to the value of her gift. They would have shed fountains had not nature been so austere. But Delia, who

could have done so, was seen to refrain. She had the power to weep copious tears over the commonest circumstance; but now, when they were expected of her, and in a sense demanded, as an acknowledgment of the poignant distress, the desperate sorrow, of one and all, she sat looking frightened indeed, like the rest, but without so much as one in her eye. It was inconsistent; and in one who could weep it was unfeeling, not to say an exhibition of bad form.

"Delia," said Joan, "I don't think you quite appreciate what has happened. I am sure you would take it more to heart if you did."

"I don't see why we should be so gloomy," said Delia, "if they were really in love."

"If you talk like that," said Joan, "you must go out of the room."

Delia looked bewildered.

"If they were really in love," she persisted, with a shake of the head, and a half-smile to herself.

At once they fell upon Delia. With enormous gusto they fell upon her. They rent her in pieces. They proved to their own sombre satisfaction that her point of view was outrageous. Delia, however, seemed quite incapable of apprehending the nature of the position she had taken up. That subtle twist in her youthful mind to which their attention had been directed several times had never been so painfully in evidence.

"You know what father once said of you," they reminded her with the mournful triumph of despair. "You have not forgotten, Delia, that father said once that had you been a boy you might have grown up to be a Radical."

"I don't quite know what a Radical is, but perhaps it is something that is rather nice," said their youngest sister, with a perfectly horrid impenitence.

"Delia!" they sang together.

"I know I don't see things as you see them, and I suppose I am very wicked because I don't; but it would not be honest to say I do if I do not, would it?"

"We are all very much ashamed of you," said Joan, with a sternness that made Delia feel very frightened. "You talk just like a person out of a common family."

"I feel like one," said Delia.

"Delia!" they gasped.

"I know I ought to feel myself to be above others, but I don't at all. I feel just the meanest and weakest, the most small and most wretched person you can find anywhere. I don't feel a bit better than anybody else, although my name *is* Broke. In fact I would rather be anybody than who I am."

"Delia!" they shouted.

Here was anarchy.

"I can't help it. I know I am very wicked and low-spirited, but that is how I feel. There is no pleasure in trying to persuade yourself that you are important, if you know you are not. I never could make-believe. I daresay that is why kings and queens are so miserable. Everybody bows down to them, and says nice things to them, and pretends that they are different from others; but the kings and queens know all the time that they are not. That is what makes them so unhappy."

"Do you mean to tell us that Billy is no better than—than this person out of a shop that he has married?" Joan demanded with a fierceness that made Delia quail.

"Yes, Joan, I do," said Delia, trembling at a piece of effrontery she knew to be without a parallel.

"I shall tell your father what you say," said Joan, withering her younger sister with her eyes.

"No, you must not do that," interposed Philippa. "You remember what father said, you know, Joan?"

"Then I shall tell her mother," said the Roman-hearted one.

"I don't care," said Delia drearily. She clasped her hands round her knees and fixed her eyes on the celebrated picture of her uncle Charles. "I cannot help it. It is wrong and wicked of me, but I cannot help it. When you are unhappy your long descent does not comfort you."

Large tears filled her eyes suddenly. They completely obliterated the coloured outline of her uncle Charles on the wall before them.

"You don't deserve to have any descent whatever," said Joan with a snort.

"I wish I had not," said Delia through her sobs.

"You are what father calls a—a——" Joan paused

with a deliberate integrity of selection to hunt the one word to wipe her out. " You are what father would call a Gladstonian Liberal. You bring us into disgrace. It is selfish and debasing and weak-minded to talk as you talk. You are unworthy to be one of us. Do you think father would have forbidden us to speak of Billy in his presence, if Billy had not been guilty of an act of terrible wickedness ? "

" Don't, please don't," said her youngest sister piteously. " I cannot bear any more—indeed I can't."

" You shall not be spared," said Joan in a voice that was merciless.

If haughty looks had the power to slay it is to be feared that Delia would not have survived her present ignominy. Her five sisters were too quaintly the children of their father : the old Adam that animated him animated them. They also were subscribers to very few ideas, but those that had once received their sanction were supported with a firmness, an absence of compromise, that became a religion. Such heresy as this of their youngest sister's they felt in the bitterness of the hour to be a stain upon the fair, the unsullied escutcheon of their fidelity. It impeached their sacred loyalty. What would their father say if he could hear her ? was the thought that harrowed their minds. Officially and by accident of birth Delia was one of them. The tie of blood was too inviolable to be broken. The slur was on themselves. It was one of the disadvantages arising from the grand hereditary principle.

" This is the doing of that horrid man, that horrid bookseller," said Joan, who had been taking thought where to have the offender for the last two minutes.

Delia winced, as though she had been burnt. Her face became enveloped in a sheet of flame.

No sooner was the indelible signal hoisted in her than the unmerciful beholders knew that the wretched offender bound hand and foot, was delivered to their tender mercies. Never was a condign punishment merited more signally. Not only was it in itself a crime of the deepest dye to be guilty of betraying an emotion for a man such as he, but they saw in it an additional act of disloyalty to themselves. It struck to the roots of their ascetic principles. A misdemeanour of this magnitude must be stamped out. It

threatened to poison the well spring whence gushed their few but wholly sacred tenets in all their virgin purity. Joan, and Joan only, the high and inflexible, the one having authority, their father's deputy, must take up this matter alone and in person. She must administer the extreme rigour of the law, because if such an intolerable spirit was allowed to manifest itself without check in one so young there was no saying to what it might lead. One and all fell back in silence before this august instrument of justice.

"Delia," said Joan very slowly. "Your words and conduct are disgraceful. We are so ashamed of you that we wish you were not our sister."

The other four huddled together with awe-stricken looks, but there was a full measure of approval in their fierce eyes.

An Uncle Charles kind of look came over Delia. When it appeared in him it never failed to arouse their pity; but now in their young sister it seemed merely contemptible. It was a look of despair which you sometimes saw in the eyes of a hound when it was going to be beaten. But Joan was not the person to spare her.

"You disgrace us all," said Joan. "You are everything that is horrid, wicked, and impossible."

"I am not," said Delia, with a sudden but totally indefensible flutter of spirit.

"Yes you are!" they shouted in chorus.

Women are like the baser animals: they grow mad with valour when opposed to those who cannot defend themselves. These were high-hearted and fearless creatures, but as soon as they had their young sister delivered without weapons into their hands, their sex urged them to fall upon her claw and fang.

"You are friends with that bookseller; you know you are," they shouted. "We believe you have hardly left off crying since he went away to London. You are disgracing us all. It is quite true what Joan says: you are everything that is horrid, wicked, and impossible. You are a Radical, a Socialist, and a Democrat. You know you are, and you cannot deny it. Your father has known it for a long time, only he is too kind to say so. We don't know how you dare to cry about that low and shabby bookseller. If you must cry over something you might at least

have the decency to reserve your tears for a gentleman."

"Or why not a dog or a tame pheasant," said Philippa the ever-practical, "if you feel you must cry over something."

Delia had been crushed to silence as long as their taunts were levelled at her alone. Her private opinion of herself was so mean that she felt she must deserve them. But now they were hurled at one whose personal character she was convinced was unassailable, she felt her feet on ground sufficiently firm to take a stand upon it.

"You shall not talk of him like that," she whimpered, with her blue eyes flashing, and a tear running along her nose. "He is as much a gentleman as father, or Billy, or Uncle Charles is. He could not be guilty of a mean action if he tried; I don't think he could be capable of a mean thought; and if you think it is a disgrace for him to be poor, the disgrace is yours for having such ideas. It would be impossible for him to have such opinions and to speak as horridly as you are speaking now. His mind is too high to find room for such cruel and vulgar thoughts. He would not know what you meant. He did not know what mother meant when she once talked to him as you are talking now."

"A little horror of a bookseller! A shabby and undersized little man!" they snorted.

Their youngest sister was not quite so defenceless as they had supposed. She was getting in one or two shrewd knocks of her own, and feeling them when they least expected, they began in a fury of retaliation to hit out wildly, with poor and uncertain aim.

Delia was exulting in new courage because desperation had found weapons for her. And she knew they were far more formidable than any in their possession. She had greater resources of vocabulary than had they, a livelier imagination, and a much finer array of ancient and modern parallels with which to assault them. They had always boasted of their tremendous contempt for books; they should now see how nice it was to have them for your friends when it came to fighting.

"You do not deserve to be argued with," said Delia,

valiant in this thought. "Your minds are so poor and wretched that they are not worthy of notice. But I will just say this. I was reading the other day a book by a great author that you have not even heard of, so it is no use to tell you his name. The book was called *The Book of Snobs*, and the people in it were so cruel and horrid and low-minded that I felt sure they did not exist out of the writer's imagination. But I now find that they do. You are those people. The author meant you, I am certain, and I am quite ashamed to be connected with you. I don't suppose you know what a snob is. I will tell you: a snob is a mean admirer of mean things. Say that over to yourselves; and I wish you would read the book. Then you would see just what you look like."

They were quite taken aback for the moment. This was not the Delia they knew; the Delia they could snub and bully with impunity. This was an armed and courageous Delia; an Amazonian Delia who would engage and pummel the whole five of them singlehanded at once. They had never been so astonished, so confounded in all their young lives. Fancy a silly little kid with filmy blue eyes with lashes to them that curled up at the ends in a most foolish manner, a silly little kid who wept when she pored with her legs crossed over a fairy story, to be capable of giving such a display as that. For the moment their several breaths were completely taken away by it; and one and all were smarting in various places.

As usual in moments of crisis they paused and waited for their natural leader. The intrepid and redoubtable gathered herself for the greatest intellectual effort she had ever felt it needful to achieve.

"Books, always books now," said Joan at a magnificently forensic leisure. "What do books matter? They are written by vulgar people, as a rule, and it is generally vulgar people who take notice of what is written in them. They are no use after leaving school, and they are not much use before one leaves. I never learnt anything from a single one myself, except from the Badminton hunting book that father has got in the library. They make nice pieces of furniture in pretty bindings in mother's room; and one or two on the tables in the drawing room look all right,

but what good are they? I always did despise them, and now I have seen a real author, an author who writes for his living, I shall despise them more. We knew that professional authors—aunt Emma is not a professional author—were generally poor and dirty and low, and did not cut their hair; but until I had seen your friend the bookseller, a real live one, I didn't know what really wretched things they were. By comparison Wilkins looks respectable and Porson a perfect gentleman. Why, Shakespeare, the leading author of them all, was a common poacher, and if he had come before father at the Sessions he would have had to go to prison."

"You are beneath contempt," said Delia.

"So Aunt Emma says," chimed the other four eagerly. Joan's passing allusion to that lady had given them an inspiration. "Now that her young man has taught you to be bookish you begin to give yourself airs like she does. You are learning the same trick of talking at us, although you have not got your voice quite so high up at present. But you must not think we shall stand it from you, you silly cheeky little kid, because we shall not, Joan, shall we?"

"No, indeed," said Joan.

"I hate Aunt Emma, too. She is beneath contempt also."

"But you try to talk like her."

"I don't!"

"Yes, you do."

Their unlucky reference to Aunt Emma had taken the wind out of Delia's sails suddenly. The tables were turned at once. There are few moments harder to support than that when the noble cause we have so gallantly espoused before the mob provokes a revulsion of feeling within our own hearts by the citation of the charlatan. Could it be possible that her conduct at all resembled Aunt Emma's? She had come to see that her aunt had no truer feeling for the art she patronized than she had for anything else in earth or heaven. But to make her sisters see that was hopeless. To be a lover of books was to be an Aunt Emma: a synonym for all that was pretentious, small-minded, insincere.

In the end they routed Delia utterly and completely.

She struck her colours altogether before this unlucky mention of the author of *Poses in the Opaque*. The fervour of the prophet preaching a strange splendid gospel to Israel ran out of her as suddenly as it had come. She was beaten out of the field; and put to flight to her bedroom, that sanctuary whither she could take refuge in tears.

CHAPTER XXIII

A Descent into the Avernus of Broad Farce

MANY hours of late had Delia spent coiled up on her counterpane. In the very moment of her friend's departure she had been overcome by her sense of loss. She would look on him no more. The fact seemed too harsh, too inexorable. Was it not terrible that a spectre should glide across her life, only to vanish after she had gazed on it for one brief but fatal instant, and that she should be left haunted for ever in the manner of the unhappy knight of *La Belle Dame Sans Merci*? He had cast a fell disease upon her which he alone had the power to assuage; and without even a recognition of her pass he rode away into those immeasurable mountain fastnesses in which he would be lost completely. He was gone from her, leaving only a memory. He could never return. An unpitying introspection had taught her that she was too poor a specimen of her kind to arouse an emotion in that splendid austere spirit. The knowledge did but render the craving to do so more consuming, more over-mastering. To have no existence in the bosom of the gods is not humiliation so much as torment. If only she could have given him a faint sense of what her great devotion to him was; if only she could have kindled just one little spark in him of recognition of her entity; if only her nature had possessed the requisite scope, the requisite power, to have imposed itself on his in the meanest way, she would have asked no more! It was the knowledge that she had been unable to project even a shadow upon that unsullied consciousness that made her lot so forlorn, so hopeless beyond expression.

He could not know now, and would not ever. He had gone from her without a sign, leaving her to mourn the day on which he had come into her life. She would read his name in the London newspapers, but of her existence he would have no record. In a year or perhaps less he would not remember that she had been. Even now he might be wiping all trace of her out of the tablets of his mind, as a page of his early and chequered history which he was eager to erase. In the sharp pangs of bereavement she foresaw that from year to year she must continue to bear her devout adoration to the grave, without hope of honour, without hope of recompense. He would never guess what she endured for him. The candles she would keep burning before the altar of his splendid memory would have not even the sanction of his pity.

Against the instinct that pleaded with her; against reason, modesty, reticence, decency, and all the fetishes of the feminine heart she had clung to the hope that he would not leave her desolate. Right up to that last day had she clung with a frantic fearing spirit to the thought that was hardly more than a wish, to the hope that was hardly more than a desire, that he would permit her just one evidence by which she might recognize that she actually counted in the sum of things. But not a crumb did he vouchsafe. He bade her good-bye with the slightly tender ironical simplicity that was his cloak, his external mode. There was no more than that between them. There was nothing that the most hungry nature could accept in the dreary years that had to come.

A thousand times did she recall the chords of his voice; a thousand times did she review his chance phrases and words; a thousand times did she re-paint the least premeditated expressions on his face. It was in vain: they did not offer a crumb. "I am not so much to him now as the cover of a book, nor have been ever!" was the intolerable reflection that changed the burning tears of her heart into ice.

The child had hardly the stoical pride of her race. She could not cover the ravages in her callow breast, and wear an outward smile before her little world. She could not conceal the keenest bites of the serpent proudly. Her

heaviness of look, her listlessness, the black rings round her eyes were there for all to read who were curious. Her sisters read fiercely, and requited her with their contempt. Every day she met with a fuller measure of their scorn. They threatened to bar the door of their common room against her. Her mother was too much occupied with graver matters to notice her unhappiness. Besides, their ailments were so few that they hardly ever troubled her; and when they did were always so little complex that the most primitive and homely prescriptions could set them right. Her father was too little addicted to the habit of observing anything to penetrate to the subtle nature of her malady. Besides, it was so elusive, so hypothetical, that in any case it would have defeated him. If they broke a limb it was well and good; it could be set in splints; but you do not ask a horse doctor to diagnose a disease of the mind.

Strangely, it was her uncle Charles, a person entirely given over body and soul to the drinking of whisky and water, who first engaged the public attention to the Child's distress. One rainy afternoon, when they were drinking tea in the drawing-room with their mother and father, and their Aunt Emma, who had come on a mission of a charitable nature, their Uncle Charles, who also had happened to look in, not knowing that aunt Emma was there, took Delia's chin between his finger and thumb, and peered at her for a long time with his head cocked funnily to one side.

"I tell you what," he said, "the little filly's off her feed. Has been for more than a week. At first I thought I might not be seein' straight, but now I'm dead sure I am. Wants a bran mash."

This solicitude drew down a great deal more of the public regard upon Delia than she felt able to support.

"She's right enough," said her father.

"The child has probably been over-eating herself," said her Aunt Emma, after a steady examination through her glasses.

Her mother gave her the benefit of a patient scrutiny. She concluded it by smiling faintly. There was little that was hidden from those ruthless eyes.

"I tell you I don't like the looks of the tit," said her Uncle Charles, having waited in vain for a confirmation of his opinion. "I should let her see the vet."

"Nonsense, my dear Charles," said her mother amiably. "He would only give her a ball. There is really nothing the matter. Her studies have perhaps excited her a little. But they are over now for a time. Her tutor has very inconsiderately run away and left her."

Instead of looking at her brother when she gave this piece of information, she placidly scrutinized the mobile face of her youngest daughter.

"It is an act of inconsideration, not to say incivility, not to say impertinence," said Lady Bosket, winding herself up, word by word, into a state of indignation, "and in the letter I wrote to him on the subject I took the opportunity of expressing my displeasure. If a person undertakes a particular task one expects him not to relinquish that task until it has been fulfilled."

"But the circumstances were somewhat exceptional, were they not?" said Mrs. Broke, with an instinct for justice it occasionally amused her to betray. "Had he not to take up a more important post? I understood so, at least. In the circumstances one can hardly expect a man of ability to waste his time over a dull and backward girl."

"He did not hold it to be a waste of time before he obtained this post of which you speak, when he had hardly a coat to his back. And I would venture to ask by whose agency he has obtained this appointment?"

"By yours?" suggested Mrs. Broke modestly.

"In so many words, perhaps, I do not choose to say. But you rather force one to admit that the importance that is now attached to one's name in the literary world has reacted to his advantage. If one may say it without appearing presumptuous, one's personal sanction is the highest credential he can seek with editors and that sort of people."

"That is to say, Emma, in plain terms, that you were indirectly responsible for his promotion?"

"Indirectly or directly, whichever you choose."

"Truly an interesting, one might say an *informing*, side-

light on the way in which things are managed in the world of letters. Singular, is it not, how the floodtide of one great reputation carries smaller ones irresistibly forward upon its wave ?"

"It is always so, my dear; always has been; always will be," purred the authoress, whose formidable absence of humour made her the predestined victim of her sister-in-law, who enjoyed the pleasure of "drawing" her whenever she chose without having to pay for her entertainment. "Believe me, my dear, one never obtains an overtopping reputation in letters but what one's imitators and hangers-on reap the benefit. There are writing people nowadays of both sexes, they can be counted by the dozen, who by an imitation of my style and manner, who by vulgarizing and cheapening it, make it more acceptable to the market place, and thereby are in the habit of obtaining larger sums for their debased copies than I am in the habit of obtaining for the original. The fact is a painful and sordid one, but oh! so true. In the last conversation I had with my old and dear friend the late Mr. Gladstone, just before his decease, the dear man, he commiserated with me upon this point. Although, of course, as I told him, mere money is always the last thing one cares to consider in a matter of this nature."

"So the poor devils the publishers think when you hawk your prose round to every house in London to squeeze the last ha'penny," said Lord Bosket, taking a sip of his favourite beverage.

"Charles, what do you mean?" said the authoress, raising her glasses, and preening her plumage in the manner of an extremely aggressive cockatoo.

"Beg pardon, my mistake," said the culprit humbly.

"As usual, a prophet is without honour in one's own country," said the authoress, seeking to pass over this trying incident with a thin smile, and a laboured attempt to be jocular.

"You may be a profit in your own country, but you ain't a bare livin' in theirs," said Lord Bosket. "You haven't forgotten that last letter Newton & Faraday wrote you to say that if you would insist on a royalty of three bob on a volume four and six net they might as

well draw down the blinds, and look about for an honest livin'."

"Charles, I *forbid* you to discuss these disgusting commercial details in my presence."

"Wrong again," murmured Lord Bosket *sotto voce* to his nieces. "Crushed again. Never open my mouth but what I put my foot in it."

"Has your last beautiful and ennobling volume been a success?" asked Mrs. Broke, pouring out fresh cups of tea.

"Not half," said Lord Bosket. "I read in the *Sportin' Times* that it has stirred the great heart of the American Continent to its profoundest depths. The missis and Matthew Arnold are going to divide the cake. Or I may have seen it in the *Times*—same thing. Anyhow, they want her to cross the Pond and give 'em a series of lectures. So do I. If she takes out the same series as she has given me at home she'll be a success. I don't mind layin' even money that the great heart of the American Continent is stirred a bit more. They don't know what they are askin'."

The valour that was in Lord Bosket this afternoon was unusual. As meek as a mouse as a rule in the presence of his lady wife he seldom went out of his way to court her displeasure. But when the last spark of a masculine spirit did happen to reassert itself in him it was generally in the presence of others. He knew that he was then comparatively safe for the time being, for the last thing his lady wife cared to do was to make a public display of her prowess. A scene was vulgar; it was therefore reserved for the domestic hearth. On those occasions when her degraded lord had partaken of just the right quantity of whisky to enable him to merge a proper discretion and decency in a natural love of chaff, she waited, in the phrase of ladies in a less exalted station in life, "she waited until she got him home."

Probably the true reason for Lord Bosket's intrepidity on this occasion was that he suffered an acute agitation of mind. Knowledge recently come into his possession had done not a little to disquiet him. He was distressed not so much on his own account, because he was too oblivious of

the world to have a shadow of trepidation for the figure he might cut before it; but rather because he suspected how irksome it must prove to his brother-in-law, whose character could brook no public ignominy. With his customary solicitude for others, he felt himself already to be in a measure responsible for the galling of that proud spirit. He could not forget that he had been a prime instrument in urging Broke to accept a seat on the Board of Directorate of the Thames Valley Goldfields Syndicate. With his own advice and example and with powerful aid from his sister he had induced Broke to pledge himself to that concern. He had seen in it a golden opportunity for a beautiful ineffectual angel of commerce to profit in a financial sense, without risking one of the pennies he could so ill afford to gamble with. He was there that afternoon, however, to inform his brother-in-law that the great scheme had fallen to the ground; and not only so, but it was his disagreeable duty to have to prepare the nice mind of this dilettante in trade for something that could be trusted to shock it terribly. Developments were expected that might totally discredit the Board of Directors.

"I saw Salmon this morning, Edmund, and he tells me we have got to face the music."

Broke's bewilderment was so frank that Lord Bosket felt it necessary to be a little more lucid.

"Salmon says you know that there is no gold in the Thames Valley after all, and that those experts were all wrong. And he says the shareholders are kickin' up a dust and are askin' for their money to be returned. Salmon says they won't get it. All the newspapers are against us dead, and the *Daily Telegraph* says that when the matter is sifted it will be found to be about the biggest take-in of the century. Nice for us directors, what? A public inquiry has been ordered, and they are sayin' in town that if we directors get our deserts we shall find ourselves toeing the line in the dock on a charge of conspiracy."

If Lord Bosket had planted a bomb on the carpet he could not have had a more electrical effect upon Broke. Our hero sat up in his chair with a painfully startled face, with much the same wild look in it that his wife had observed when she broke the news to him of his son's marriage. But

on this occasion he did not vent his feelings in words, beyond the monosyllable—

"Oh!"

Lord Bosket at once put forth an effort to soften the rather tragic impression he had made. He felt a pang; indeed, Broke's distress was so great that it would have made its appeal to a harder heart.

"I would not think too much about it, Edmund, if I were you. Salmon is a tricky fish and knows his way about under the water. He'll find a way out, don't you worry. He says if anybody is to blame it is the experts; and it is not likely that we directors would be holding shares if we had not been taken in."

"But I don't hold any," said Broke in a hollow voice.

"Fishy transferred some of his to you in case of accident."

Suddenly Lord Bosket's jaw dropped.

"Yes; and that reminds me he's parted with 'em too! He unloaded three weeks ago and gave us all the office to do likewise. He sold above par—lord knows how much!—and now you can have Thames Valley Goldfields at one and fourpence a hundred if you want 'em. But Salmon is as clever as the deuce; although it does look a bit 'off,' what? I don't wonder that we have got to face the music."

Poor Broke sat in a huddle. The startled look that still haunted his face made it appear that he had just had an encounter with a ghost.

"Surely here is a sequel that was to be foreseen," said Lady Bosket. "I confess that I predicted it from the first. People who associate themselves with such atrocious persons as this Lord Salmon should be prepared to take the consequences. You might at least have had the decency to respect *my* feelings, Charles. Not only do you bring your own name into disrepute, but, what is far graver, you bring *mine*. Why should *I* strive to enhance it and keep it fragrant among our fellow creatures if your one idea is to debase it and to cause it to stink in their nostrils. I only ask, Charles, that you should have a little respect for *my* feelings, but this, apparently, is asking too much. As for Edmund, I am sure *he* is the last man in the world to be able to afford to bring his name lower than it is already."

"Here, kennel missis!" said Lord Bosket. "You let Edmund alone. Don't you mind her, my boy. It's all my fault. But Salmon will find out a way all right. It may be a bit awkward for us at first, now that these shareholders and people are showing their teeth, but we shall come out top dog in the end I'll lay a monkey. Fishy is no fool; take my tip and have a bit on Saul."

"We—ah—must refund every farthing of their money," said Broke.

He had been sunk in thought, and this was the result of his abstraction.

"A little item of four millions sterling," said Lord Bosket. "I should like to see Fishy refunding mere bagatelles of that sort."

"It must be done," said Broke firmly. "Every penny."

"Well, my boy, sell your house and furniture and throw in the mortgages on your land and see how much that makes towards it. The affair has a rum look, I'll admit; but, as Salmon says, these shareholders and people had the opinion of the experts to work by the same as we had. And now the experts have proved to be wrong they are going to turn round on us because we had the good sense to let go before we burnt our fingers. Salmon says there is no law in the world that can touch us."

"There is one in heaven," said Lady Bosket. "It is the most impudent piece of scoundrelism I ever heard."

"It didn't prevent you clearing a cool three thousand, missis, by selling at the proper time. Hullo, here's Salmon himself."

The announcement at this moment of the promoter was sufficiently dramatic. His entrance was no less so. He marched in with his habitual air of victory. Signs of dejection, of hesitancy, of self-distrust which the circumstances might have been expected to induce, were far to seek.

He took a chair magnificently. "They have arranged a fête and gala for the meeting on Monday," he began, "but I think there are one or two things we shall be able to put before them. If we can't manage that parcel of calves and crows it's a pity. Country parsons mostly and widows in rusty black. I wonder if they think we are going to take

any of their sauce. They had the prospectus to go by the same as we had; there were the reports of the experts: Goodliffe's analysis of the mud taken from under Battersea Bridge; Thomson's Theory of the Precious Metal Deposits found on the foreshore at the Welsh Harp; Wilson's article on Bimetalism, and God knows what; and now they've put their money down they ask calmly to take it up again. I wonder what they think we are—philanthropists? Do they think we play at this game merely for the pleasure of seeing our names in print? If they had had the common sense to clear out when we did, I wonder if they would be wanting now to repudiate their shares. Their game is, heads I win, tails you lose; but that's not good enough for Salmon, thank you."

"Hear, hear, and applause," said Lord Bosket. "I must say as a member of the Board, the Promoter of the Company talks like a cock-angel with wings and a white nightshirt. I'm not what you call a bettin' man, Fishy, as you know, but if I were I should place a monkey on you, my son, and back you both ways."

"You would not be wrong, my boy, if you did," said Lord Salmon warmly. "You would not be wrong. I'll let them see on Monday. I wonder if a jury of matrons think they are going to heckle me."

"Yes, I think they are on the wrong hoss," said Lord Bosket, with a quaintly reflective glance at his glass.

It was at this moment that Broke was seen to draw himself up stonily to regard his unwelcome visitor.

"Lord Salmon, I should like to say a word. I wish in the—ah—fullest manner to—ah—repudiate the whole of this transaction."

"So do several other people," said Lord Salmon drily.

"In the most unconditional way I wash my hands of what I do not hesitate to call a—ah—a shady business."

"Don't hesitate to call it what you like, my boy; but we are all in the same boat. You are one of the crew, the same as we are."

Broke's face turned a deep tawny. There was a powerful gleam of anger burning in him which he tried hard to restrain.

"I never intended to go on this Board of Directors.

I was led and—and—ah—cajoled into so doing against my better judgment. I don't—ah—hesitate—ah—to—ah—ah—say that my hand was forced by—ah—circumstances. At the time I did not know precisely—ah—what I was—ah—undertaking. I can only regret my ignorance and—and my—ah—carelessness."

By the time our powerfully agitated gentleman had finished this impassioned confession his face was even darker than when he began it.

"Woa—easy, Edmund," said Lord Bosket, in accents of pity. "Don't think about it, there's a good feller, and it will all come right by-and-bye. It will, Fishy, won't it?"

"Not much doubt about that, my boy," said Lord Salmon, accepting a cup of tea from the excessively gracious hands of Mrs. Broke.

"Sugar, Lord Salmon?"

The inordinate sweetness of the smile she lifted up to him was such that the delighted financier said—

"Look into the cup, ma'am, and it won't be needed."

Lady Bosket took up her glasses and stared at the epigrammatist, while her eldest niece seated opposite to her counted mentally as far as one hundred and seven.

"Lord Salmon," said Broke, whose agitation was increasing at every word he uttered, while his face grew so black that it looked convulsed. "Lord Salmon, to be—ah—ah—perfectly plain with you, I cannot—ah—I cannot help thinking that I have been hoodwinked, and—ah—that I have been made your tool. I am a plain man and speak on—ah—these occasions what is in—ah—my mind."

"Quite right, my boy, quite right," said Lord Salmon, nodding his head in approval. "Have the habit myself. Admire you for it."

"I don't ask for your—ah—your admiration, Lord Salmon. In fact—ah—I would—ah—rather be without it. I see clearly that—ah—my criminal—ah—folly has placed me in your power. I—ah—can never sufficiently deplore it. But I may say, Lord Salmon—ah—I may say in one word, that—ah—I shall conceive it my duty to—ah—attend this meeting on Monday, when—ah—I—ah—

shall make a statement to the unfortunate shareholders to —ah—that effect."

Our hero concluded the longest and quite the most impassioned address he had delivered extempore in the whole of his life by pulling a huge handkerchief out of his pocket and wiping his head with tremendous vigour.

Lord Salmon could not forbear to laugh lustily, and by so doing chose to ignore the signals of Lord Bosket, who wagged his head at him in a series of energetic warnings.

"You ought to go on the stage, my dear Broke," said Lord Salmon. "You are too funny for words. A humorist you are and no mistake! Here am I, out of sheer respect for you, doing all I can to put you in for a good thing, and here are you turning round to bite the hand of friendship. Why, my boy, do you know what I did? Said I to myself, there is going to be a bit of picking here; old Broke, who has not enough about him to see these things for himself, must have a finger in this pie. He must be in at this; it will do him good. And what do I do? I daresay our friend Bosket has told you. No? Well, I transfer five hundred pounds worth of script from my name to yours; partly, my boy, because I want to do you a good turn, and partly because it looks well for the directors to pledge themselves to the concern. And when the psychological moment turned up a week or two ago I converted that five hundred pounds worth of shares into a little matter of four thousand pounds odd. There is a cheque for that amount in my pocket-book. And yet, my dear fellow, on the top of all this you sit there and give me the rough side of your tongue. Still I don't bear malice; others might, don't you know, but personally I understand you, and I like you. You old-fashioned country big-wigs are a funny-tempered lot. But I want you to understand, my boy, that, as a mere matter of principle, I wish you well."

"I—ah—dissociate myself entirely from your schemes," said Broke. "I—ah—decline to—ah—discuss the matter with you further. I—ah—repudiate the—ah—whole transaction, and—ah—on Monday at—ah—the meeting I—ah —shall say so to the shareholders. I—ah—shall make —ah—a statement to them in regard to my position. In

—ah—the meantime—ah—Lord Salmon—the—ah—matter is closed. I—ah—wash—my—ah—hands of it."

"You wash your hands of this?" said Lord Salmon, with an air of keen enjoyment.

He took out his pocket book, and produced a cheque for four thousand three hundred and thirty-five pounds made out in Broke's favour. He rose from his chair and carried it over to our hero. With a quizzical smile he dropped it into his astonished hands.

"This—ah—for me," said Broke.

His bewilderment seemed extreme.

"Of course, my boy, of course," said Lord Salmon indulgently. "'Pon my soul you are funny! You are better than one of those comic operas at the Savoy." He burst again into uncontrollable laughter.

In the meantime Broke had looked at the document, and was able to divine, by a superhuman effort, its nature. With great deliberation he began to tear the paper into very small pieces, and in that act his fingers trembled so violently that many of the fragments fluttered on to the carpet.

A silence intervened that could be felt. It was broken by the protesting voice of Lord Bosket.

"Edmund, you are a fool. I should ha' thought you had more sense than to throw good money down the gutter. It's an expensive luxury; not many fellers can afford it."

"It's as good as Charley's Aunt," roared Lord Salmon, who had never been so diverted in his life.

Without trusting himself to utter a word, Broke flung the last of the fragments of the cheque on to the carpet, slowly raised himself out of his chair, and stalked from the room. As the door slammed behind him, Lord Salmon's laughter grew more boisterous.

"Splendid fellow!" he shouted.

"Lord Salmon, please let me give you another cup of tea," said Mrs. Broke melodiously. Again she beamed upon the financier in a dazzling manner.

"Certainly, ma'am, certainly."

"Joan," said Lady Bosket to the niece who sat opposite, and who had not once taken her eyes from her face during

the last quarter of an hour, "I will trouble you to ring the bell."

Joan did so promptly, and with almost the same promptitude the butler appeared.

"Porson, my carriage."

Without taking leave of anybody, Lady Bosket marched out of the room with a stateliness that verged upon caricature.

Lord Salmon turned to Lord Bosket with his laugh subsiding to a loud chuckle.

"I've read Lady B.'s books, Bos, and admired them, but I don't think I should call her a great hand at conversation. She seems to have a habit of repeating herself. Does she ever say anything else than 'Porson, my carriage'?"

Lord Salmon again ascended to a roar.

"That's your luck," said the husband of the authoress. "They say you are the luckiest feller in England, and they are not far wrong. I wish I was as fortunate myself. But you must take no notice of the old dutch, Fishy, you mustn't mind her. It's only her playful little way. She is not such a bad old thing when you get to know her."

Lord Bosket having made the necessary amende to the feelings of his friend, our brace of peers conversed apart in earnest undertones. They were fain to agree that they would find it easier to take the Thames out of its valley than to divorce our hero from a conviction at which he had once arrived.

"He'll do it, you know," said Lord Bosket. "He's as stubborn as a colt if he gets an idea into his great fat head. He don't get many, but when they come they take a lease."

"If he talks at the meeting as he's talked to me," said Lord Salmon, "he will be the laughing-stock of England. He must be stopped. I don't like to see a man like that making a fool of himself."

"I'd like to see the man who could stop him. Obstinate feller!"

"A thousand pities," said Lord Salmon. "I don't wonder that he's coming to want and beggary. If a man won't move with the times, even if he is the descendant

of kings and vikings, there is only the workhouse for him. We are no respecters of persons at this time of day. That's what these blue-blooded old swells have got to learn. Most of them have learnt it, I will do them that credit. They know now that they can't stand before the cad with the moneybags. Sooner or later they have to get on to their damned old knees. Old Broke is having a longer run than most, but you and I will live to see him brought to it. He's as good as down now, although he doesn't know."

"He wouldn't own it if he did."

"You are right, my boy; but mark me, sooner or later he'll be made. When Saul Salmon, as a very young man, first came out of the east and put up his plate in the Lane the nobocracy would not turn their heads to look at him. But now, my boy, now he holds them like this in his two hands—so! they lick his boots when he wants them cleaning. How do you think I got the handle I wear to my name for advertising purposes? Simply, my boy, by taking them so, in my two rough and grimy paws, and half choking the life out of their nice white throats. I make them writhe and grovel now just when it pleases me, just for my own amusement. Without my purse I am a Cad, with it I am a God. And don't you forget it, Bosket."

There was lust, there was arrogance in the face of the millionaire, and his companion was not too obtuse to notice it.

"You must be kind to poor Edmund, Fishy," he said humbly.

"I will, my boy. For some reason I took to him from the start. I like the bulldog in him; he doesn't know when he's beat; he's a man after my own heart. I began life without a rag to my back; he's finishing without one. But we are both of us sand. It made me, and it might save him. Edmund Broke cares for nothing and nobody; neither do I. Give me that sort, and instead of licking my boots they shall feed at my table."

"You are right, Fishy; the poor devil is broke, stoney, done for, but he's sand. I love the feller myself."

"All the same, Bos, he will have to come to it, mind you. He tears up my cheque and throws it in my face, just as people who are as good as he have done before him. Now

they pick the crumbs out of my hand like sparrows. Edmund Broke will have to do the same one of these fine mornings. If you saw the letters I get from the Aristocracy —with a capital 'A'—from peeresses on the look out for pin-money, and peers wanting pipelights, it would make you laugh. Take this morning: five direct applications for company tips from women with titles—not all in the beerage either. Six invitations for dinner; three for a Saturday-to-Monday in the country; and as for at-homes, parties, God knows what, if Phoebus Apollo came driving down Piccadilly in a golden automobile he could not be more deuced popular. And why is it, do you think? Would you say it is for my *beaux yeux*, my boy? Tchah! Catch them kissing the hem of the garment of a fat and greasy and rather elderly Jew who does not disguise his hereditary weakness for garlic, if there was not to be a few shekels at the end. They want something, Bosket, but between you and me, Bosket, they don't always get it. I pick and I choose, and as a rule I give to the deserving poor. And now and again, if it amuses me, I employ the prerogative of my race and exact my pound of flesh. I have one or two anecdotes of my dealings with these fools and harpies that would make you stare. And sometimes when I find myself overworked and craving for relaxation, I grind some wretched devil with my heel."

"But not poor Edmund, Fishy."

"No, my boy, you've got my word. And I sometimes keep it. I deplore his stand-off ways for his own sake; but I like them. He's a non-squealer. I like your man who is such devilish good form that he chooses to be knocked down and killed rather than turn his stiff neck to see which way the traffic's running. But there is no hope for that man in these days. He might as well give up the game if he doesn't know how to play it."

"So I tell him. I tell him that every day of his life. But, bless you, what does *he* care? Tell me, Fishy, what can a feller do with a feller who is born eight hundred years out of his time?"

"You can watch him rot," said Lord Salmon, with gusto.

CHAPTER XXIV

In which Mr. Burchell cries "Fudge!"

BROKE, in the stress of this new turn to his affairs, had recourse to that sage counsellor, brilliant man of business, and great master of the theory of commercial first principles, Mr. Joseph Breffit. So rapidly was that eminent person approaching the term of existence allotted to man, and in such a remarkable degree had fortune smiled upon his labours in the many vineyards of the world to which his surprising talents had been directed, that to all intents and purposes he had passed into an elegant and well-merited retirement wherein his declining years could seek asylum. He was now living what euphemistically he liked to call "the life of a gentleman" in the great house in the county he had purchased for and placed at the disposal of his son.

The business he carried on now was not so exacting, not so all-absorbing, as that of his days at Cuttisham. He still permitted himself to supervise the estates and in a general way to overlook the affairs of certain among his clients. But he had contrived to let these favoured persons know that there was a measure of condescension in his continued interest in them, and that they would do well to lay the unction to their souls that it was a delicate tribute to their social standing. By these favourites of fortune, among whom was our hero, needless to say, the great man could still be consulted at those seasons when it became imperative that they should arm themselves with the accumulated stores of his knowledge and sagacity. But he liked even these of the elect, of the inner circle, to feel that he was something of a potentate now; that no longer did he

scurry hither and thither over the shire at the beck of this landowner and that; and that they could not depend on finding him at his office at Cuttisham so many days in the week, year in, year out, between the hours of ten and four.

Those who now desired to confer with Mr. Joseph Breffit must seek audience in all humility at his seat in the county, Tufton Hall, lately in the occupation of Lord Algernon Raynes. It was become the theme of conversation among his clients that old Joe Breffit was a great man now he had taken it into his head to live at poor Algernon's place. But however they might laugh and look at one another meaningly, and shrug their shoulders, and shake their heads archly, it was not always possible to do without old Joe. A time seemed to come to them all when they must have his services at any cost. "Old Joe is the knowingest fellow in England, I don't care where you look for the others," was the verdict of one blunt old squire; and with rather mournful unanimity that was allowed to be about the truth.

To this paragon of wisdom and rectitude came Broke on the morning following the revelations in the matter of the Thames Valley Goldfields Syndicate. Grim and bitter were the pangs of the feudal gentleman to reflect that he should live to see old Breffit, of all people in the world, installed here in poor Algernon's place, in the house a former duke of poor Algernon's line had built, on a day scarcely legible in the dim scroll of antiquity. Our hero had something of the feelings of a man of the stone age could he have awoke to find himself in the age of iron. All the old landmarks and fingerposts by which one was wont to gauge men and things seemed to have disappeared. A succession of Gladstonian ministries too surely had told their tale!

There was no end to Trade's ruthless ravages. Nothing was sacred from it. The fair spots of earth dedicated from immemorial time by usage and custom to unimpeachable gentlemen of feudal tastes were being filched away by this race of cunning capitalists and greedy manufacturers. What would his father have thought, the staunch and foursquare old Tory who twice refused a peerage because

that one-time worthy institution had fallen into the hands of the middle-classes, what would this fine old Englishman have thought to find motor cars superseding horseflesh, and a man of business, a tradesman, taking up his residence at Tufton Hall!

When our hero found himself on the terrace under the shadows of a gloomy façade that had obtained for the place its reputation as one of the show houses of England, he felt himself shiver in the involuntary manner which in the popular mind is held to portend that someone is engaged in walking across your grave. The fate of this sombre pile struck home. His own decay was projected across his imagination in the form of a sinister parallel. Vividly it foreshadowed the day when Covenden itself, the home of an elder race than even that of Raynes, should fall a victim to Commerce, that insatiate monster with the all-devouring maw. "Upon my word!" mused our hero, "it is sacrilege for old Breffit to set his foot here. We have 'Arrys in the hunting field; tradesmen at the covert-side; now we have come to this."

A splendid gentleman, faultless in pose and appointment, conducted our hero across the tiled hall, embellished above with a gallery and a priceless ceiling; and below with rescued tapestries from Spain, Louis Quinze furniture, every piece of which was believed to have enjoyed the sanction of La Pompadour; while round the walls were a particularly comprehensive set of ancestral portraits from Holbein to Watts, with Vandycks and an occasional Lely, Kneller, Reynolds, Gainsborough and Raeburn by the way.

The proprietor of these objects was discovered in a spacious apartment on the ground floor. His nether man was clothed in a bran-new pair of riding breeches by a specialist of Savile Row, but being discovered in a moment of elegant undress or negligé, other details of his attire were pitched hardly in the same key. For the sake of ease he had not donned either boots or leggings at this early hour. Therefore, the parts they conceal were exposed to view in three sections, consisting in white pants, red socks, and carpet slippers with cunning beaded work upon the top. The white choker tie was virgin in its purity, but

not so the shirt and collar ; the Tattersall waistcoat was a thing of beauty, but a spot of grease in the centre hardly came within its wonderful and fearful scheme of colour, although, like a middle tint in an impressionist landscape, the higher criticism might have pronounced it to be an embellishment. As a set-off to all these superlative things was a chin that had not very recently known the razor, while a ragged smoking jacket stained and discoloured all hues save the original of twenty years before, gave the predominant note to an appearance which struck our hero as a little bizarre.

On a table, at which Mr. Breffit was seated, lay a sheet of notepaper with a row of names in pencil thereupon ; and beside it an open book, over which, eye-glasses on nose, he had been poring assiduously. It was a volume of Sir Horatio Hare's fascinating if slightly cumbersome work, *The Peerage, Baronetage, Knightage, and Landed Gentry.*

" Ha, Mr. Broke," he said, holding out his hand without rising from his chair, " delighted to see you. Will you take something to drink ? Say a glass of wine now, say a glass of wine."

Our hero accepted the hand and declined the wine without any display of effusion. Mr. Breffit was frankly disappointed.

" Say a drop of port now. What do you say to a drop of port ? I've got some I can recommend. Forty-seven. That ought to be good enough even for you, Mr. Broke, eh ? The old Duke, Lord Algernon's father, laid it down, but I take it up, ha ! ha ! Come now, just one glass for the sake of old times, sir."

Our hero declined this offer also with the same absence of effusion.

" Well, well," said Mr. Breffit with a sigh, " I suppose you know best, Mr. Broke. It doesn't agree with everybody in the morning before dinner—I mean lunch. It doesn't with me. But if you will you have only to say, you know. Or do you prefer champagne, sir ? Speak, if you do ; there is plenty in the same place as the port. I've got a nice dry wine you need not be afraid of. In fact, Mr. Broke, if it comes to that, I have got about the best cellar in the county. His lordship and his father

before him knew a few things about wine, I can tell you. Come, now, Mr. Broke, just a leetle drop of 'boy' for old sake's sake."

Our hero remained equally impervious to the blandishments of champagne. Pointedly, briefly, he stated the business that was responsible for his presence. But this morning it seemed a really difficult matter to keep old Breffit down to the prosaic. It almost seemed as if the old fellow was a little flushed by the position in which he found himself, as if he had been knocked off his balance a bit by his new surroundings. For the first time in our hero's long experience of his ways he discerned a retrograde tendency, a tendency to insist on his own immediate personal affairs. There was even a disposition in him to forget the subtle degree of homage that was wont to oil the wheels, as it were, of their intercourse. It was not always so subtle either for that matter; there had been times when old Breffit's flummery had got on our hero's nerves a little. He had overlooked *that*, however. Old Breffit had always been a well-meaning man, eminently well meaning. But the suggestion of familiarity, of *off-handedness* that was in him this morning, jarred on his pontifical nerves even more. Your devoutly religious nature may occasionally deplore the presence of too much incense, but too little cuts it to the heart.

"What do you think of my little place?" said Mr. Breffit, as soon as Broke had furnished his succinct account of the Thames Valley Goldfields Syndicate disaster. "Not a bad place is it, sir?"

Our hero was not able to exhibit any particular enthusiasm for the little place. The pride of ownership which swelled the voice of Mr. Breffit merely caused him to cock his eye at that gentleman, and to stroke his chin in deep thought.

"There is everything here, you know," said the new owner, waxing on his theme. "It would surprise you, it would indeed, to see the number of people who come 'ere from all parts of the world, and from America especially, to look at what we've got. We set certain days apart you know, on which to throw the 'ouse and grounds open to the public. It is very inconvenient, you know, sir, sometimes

to be mistaken for the butler, and now and then to get a tip; or when you are sitting at dinner—I mean lunch—to see them pressing their noses against the windows: it gives you a kind of feeling that they 'ave come to watch the lions feed. But, after all, these are a part of our responsibilities. *Noblesse oblige*—I daresay you 'ave felt the same thing yourself."

"Humph!" said our hero.

"I suppose it is only right. We ought not to be selfish in these matters. We ought to do what we can to elevate the masses. If it educates them and gives them 'igher thoughts to look at old oil paintings, I am not the one to say them nay. 'Let them all come' is my motto. But I feel a great responsibility, Mr. Broke, all the same. You see, Lord Algernon was—you will, ahem! pardon my frankness, but it has always been my rule to speak out—Lord Algernon was not at all particular. He 'ung up pictures of nude figures of both sexes."

"Humph!" said our hero.

"They tell me one of the ceilings is by Marie Corelli—the one with the little flying angels on it. Very pure and 'igh-minded I call it, considering the subject—'Beauty in Distress'—and 'Beauty' is so nicely dressed that it ought to be a fine moral lesson to some other artists I could name. I call that ceiling 'armless, sir. Very moral and elevating. But, personally, the landscapes appeal to me most. There's a genuine Claude Duval. And that little thing in a gilt frame on the right hand as you come in is supposed to be a genuine Theodore Watts Dunton. Said to be very convincing and of rare distinction."

"Humph!" said our hero.

"Then, sir, the furniture is worthy of your attention. There is a Chippendale cabinet, and a Sheridan sideboard with poker work inlaid; the chairs are mostly Paul Very-uneasy and Lewis Carroll. The piano in the blue drawing-room is an upright Stradivarius on which Ole Bull had the honour of playing ''Ome, Sweet 'Ome' before her Majesty at Cowes."

"Humph!" said our hero.

"The grounds are worthy of attention, too. There are

several trees planted by the late Prince Consort, also one or two cut down by the late Mr. Gladstone."

"Humph!" said our hero.

"There are all things and everything. In the cabinet in the yellow room among the curios there is the air-cushion that was kept for the Prince Regent to sit on when he had the gout. There is the identical penny doll the Prince of Wales wore in his hat when he went to the Derby in '67. There is Queen Anne's favourite snuffbox; and a strip of the shift that Mother Brownrigg was executed in. There are the shoes of a Derby winner bred and owned by Lord Algernon's father; and the pantaloons worn by old Q. and Lord George Bentinck on the memorable day. In fact, Mr. Broke, there are a thousand and one things too numerous to refer to. I shall be very happy, sir, personally to take you on a tour of the house and grounds like I do parties of excursionists."

"Humph!" said our hero.

"But, you know, Mr. Broke"—Mr. Breffit's excited voice suddenly grew pregnant with mystery—"I have always maintained it is not manners that maketh man so much as his surroundings. To-morrow we start our entertaining. There is a lot of *real* swells coming here, friends of my son's. They would never have thought of coming to my pokey hole and corner little house at Cuttisham, but here, sir, you see it's different. They are all real *slap-up* people, every one, sir. You would not be ashamed to meet them yourself. I wish you would name a day on which you could come over and dine with us. And we could find you a bed; no end of room, you know. I have just been looking out who these friends of his are. All their names are in Hare right enough, so they are perfectly safe."

"Humph!" said our hero.

"Every one of their fathers is in Hare. And there is not one lower in rank than a baronet, and he is all right, because he is a second cousin to the author. But, of course, you and I, Mr. Broke, understand the real value of having a handle to one's name. It is not worth anything, strictly speaking, but the world has yet to find that out; and when all is said, it does give you a feeling of security that whatever they may say or whatever they may do

has the sanction, as it were, of their social position. I think it is good for my son to choose his acquaintances from among the 'ighest in the land. A man is known by the company he keeps. I am thankful to say, my son has early found out for himself the great, the immense value of that adage."

"Humph!" said our hero.

"You might say that we have got coming to-morrow the *crême de la crême*, the real Vere de Vere as it were. There is young Woole-Sacke, the eldest son of the Earl of Tre, Pol, and Pen, who was ennobled for the humane consideration he extended to all wrong-doers, no matter how well-connected they might be, that were brought before 'im. That is a fine example of pecuniary reward overtaking a humane and high-minded judge, who never allowed wealth and station to interfere with his unfailing courtesy. That is a great thing about England: politeness costs nothing, but it may mean a great deal. There is also the eldest son of the Earl of Beeston. His father was ennobled for building a coffee 'ouse in which a royal princess drank the first mug. He moves in the selectest society in London. Member of the Royal Yacht Squadron and the Jockey Club, and all that, you know, and his name has appeared in all the most important card scandals of the last ten years. There is no doubt about 'im. Then there is young Lord Treadwell, son of the Marquis of Kidderminster—carpets, you know. His father is a true philanthropist, and a great friend of royalty. It is not often his name is out of the papers. There is no doubt about him either. In fact, there is no doubt about any of them. Their social position, sir, is unassailable. Don't you think, Mr. Broke, that my son 'as made the most of his time to collect and bring together such a very desirable set of young men?"

"Humph!" said our hero.

At this point the proud father stopped. His volubility, touched with an intense excitement which had provoked a few liberties with our common tongue, came suddenly to an end just as our hero had been driven by despair to the conclusion that it was never going to end at all. Mr. Breffit was seen to pull himself up by a violent effort. He

coughed in an uneasy fashion, and began to wriggle in his chair without any visible cause for such a proceeding. Our hero regarded him with a stolid gravity. Now he was here he would hear the fellow out to the bitter end! After all, it threw an illuminating flashlight on the purlieus of human nature. One hardly realized into what fantastic shapes the aspirations and emotions that almost might be said to be common to us all could be twisted by uneducated minds. Breffit's rather astounding revelation of himself was not without value. It would be instructive to hear the fellow out.

"You must pardon me, Mr. Broke," said the old man, beginning again in a voice that had now dropped to a hoarse whisper, "but I think the time is now come when, without impropriety, I can speak on a subject that has been in my mind for some little time past. Of course, sir, speaking as one man of the world to another, you will understand almost without my calling attention to the fact, that in these days every tub is allowed to stand on its own bottom, as it were, and that it is every man for himself."

"Humph!" said our hero.

He did not try to elucidate this piece of pregnant reasoning.

"I don't think I have quite shown you what I mean, sir. What I want you to understand, Mr. Broke, is this: when a man gets to my time of life, and that life has been as successful as mine has been—I think I may make that admission to you, sir, without being considered boastful—he may begin to see things in a different light to that in which he was inclined to look at them when he was younger and not quite so well to do. You will understand that, sir, will you not?"

"Humph!" said our hero.

"You see, there is that son of mine, sir. He has had the best upbringing that a young man can 'ave; he mixes with the best people; he enjoys all the advantages of wealth; not to mention the minor blessings of 'ealth and a sound constitution. And it has become a pet scheme of mine, Mr. Broke, my one remaining ambition, you might say, that before I die I shall see this boy of mine settled in life with a wife whose antecedents are unimpeachable

and—er—to be quite frank with you, sir, who is capable of giving him a lift in a social sense. It may seem a wild scheme to you, Mr. Broke, but before I go I should like to see my son in—er—a fair way to—er—found a family."

"Humph!" said our hero.

The old man was exceeding all expectation.

"It may sound a bit inflated and presumptuous to you, Mr. Broke, I know; but you must not forget that everybody 'as to 'ave a beginning. If I may say it without giving offence, sir, even the family of Broke 'ad to 'ave a beginning. And what I ask myself is this: why should not I, old Joe Breffit, now that I 'ave the ways and the means, all come by honestly, mind you, and in the sweat of my brow as it were, why should not I begin like anybody else? When some of the fathers and the grandfathers of the young men who are coming to-morrow began life, sir, they were 'ardly better than I am myself. But look at them now. They are the *crême de la crême*, the real Vere de Vere. And I 'ave lately come to ask myself why, in the course of time and the fulness, the name of Breffit should not rank as 'igh as does theirs to-day?"

"Humph!" said our hero.

"Those are my feelings on the subject, Mr. Broke. And I 'ope you will be patient with me, and not think I am trespassing—trespassing unduly upon your valuable time, because upon consideration I have come to the conclusion that you, sir, are the man before all others who is in a position to 'elp me."

"Humph!" said our hero.

Our surprised but not flattered gentleman knitted his brows into a pattern of fierce perplexity.

"I beg your pardon, Breffit, but I am afraid I don't understand what you are driving at."

"No, sir, I thought you might not. I will try to make myself a little more clear. You see, it is like this, Mr. Broke—I hope you will not think I am exceeding the bounds of good taste to mention a small matter of this kind—but, speaking as one business man to another, are you aware that a few months ago Mrs. Broke did me the honour to accept a loan of me to the extent of some two thousand pounds? The matter is almost too trivial to

mention. It was just in the ordinary way of business, you know; she wanted it, I believe, for some little private speculation, which I am sorry to say did not come off. In any case, she borrowed it, sir; and as she has since told me that there is no immediate prospect of her being able to repay it, I feel, with great diffidence, you will understand, sir, that I may be pardoned if I turn to you for a helping hand in this little matter that is so near my heart. Wheels within wheels, you know, sir, as the saying is."

Our hero said "humph" no more. His eyes dilated, his face assumed the startled expression which several times had appeared on it of late; every line in his figure denoted alarm.

"Impossible. She would not be such a fool. She—ah—would not dare."

Mr. Breffit smiled a far-off smile within himself.

"There is my cheque book. I can easily produce it, sir, if you wish to see it."

Our hero waved his hand petulantly. But half a groan escaped him. His unbelief was not so much a matter of incredulity as of disinclination.

"What—ah—do you—ah—propose to do?"

"I propose to do nothing, sir, of course. But if I may, I would like to make a suggestion. The scheme I would like to be allowed to propound would, I am sure, be to our common advantage. But first, sir, I must have your permission to speak out just what is in my mind."

"You have it," said our hero shortly.

"You will undertake not to be—er—offended by it, sir?"

"Of course."

Our hero gave a grim eye to his agent. For the first time the idea dawned upon him, in all its completeness, as to what a cunning fellow this old Breffit really was. The supple and servile adviser of twenty years, in many ways the friend, was now about to issue forth in his native character of the Jew-like usurer. He could afford to snap his fingers in his face now, he the man of wealth, to the client brought to beggary. He was about to grind him, no doubt.

"Well, sir, what I 'ave in my mind is this," said the old

man with the same circumlocution, the same odd nervousness of manner that our hero had remarked in him from the beginning of the interview. "Blood without money don't count for much nowadays, does it, sir? And money likes to 'ave blood to back it when it can get it, does it not, sir? Now, why should not you and I, who I might say are typical of the two sides, if you will pardon the freedom, enter into a little arrangement for our mutual benefit?"

"Why not?" said Broke the obtuse.

"I am glad to 'ear you say that, sir, I am indeed!" said Mr. Breffit, with a fervent air of relief and thankfulness. "I felt sure, sir, you would see it in that light."

"What is your little arrangement, Breffit?"

"Well—er—you see, sir, I—er—want a wife for my son."

"In the circumstances that does not strike one as unnatural."

"I want you to 'elp me, Mr. Broke."

"I—ah—have no qualifications as far as I am aware to be a matrimonial agent."

"You have daughters, sir."

"Six."

They looked at one another. Broke looked at Breffit with the candour and self-possession of perfect innocence. For the life of him he could not see what the fellow was driving at! Breffit looked at Broke with a weary, anxious expression. Delicate suggestion could no farther go. The hint was as broad, as direct as any hint could be, yet the great man either would not or could not see it.

For once even Mr. Breffit was at a disadvantage. He had an uneasy consciousness that this matter was a little outside his milieu. He did not know quite what to say next. A transaction in shares, the recovery of a debt, the terms of a tenancy, and he was prepared to revel in the facility and the felicity of his language. But those gifts of expression did not help him here. He must be delicate; yet the man was as dense as a wall.

"Don't you take me, sir?" he said at last in desperation, shutting one eye like a character in Dickens.

"I beg your pardon, Breffit," said our hero gravely.

"Don't you understand me, sir?"

"I beg your pardon," our hero repeated more gravely than before.

Mr. Breffit was mortified. Had the man no intelligence at all! Surely it was not necessary to say in so many words just what was in one's mind. Between cultivafed people it was hardly usual to resort to such an extreme verbal precision in affairs of this peculiarly delicate kind. It was his first experience of them, it was true, but his instincts assured him that a margin for insinuation, for suggestion, ought to be allowed.

"You have daughters, sir."

"Six."

"And I have a son, sir."

"So I understand."

"Well, now, sir, do you not—er—exactly see—er—what I mean?"

Mr. Breffit in his anxiety leaned forward with his hands on his knees.

"Just now you spoke of a scheme," said our hero patiently.

"That is my scheme, sir," said Mr. Breffit in a burst of confidence.

"You speak in riddles. I—ah—cannot make you out. I do not see what your son has got to do with it. Do you—ah—wish me to understand that Mrs. Broke borrowed this money of *him*. If that is the case, why—ah—not say so in as many words?"

Mr. Breffit ran his fingers through his sparse hair. How was it possible to be delicate with a man of this kidney!

"It is not a question of the money, sir, altogether."

"If it is not a question of the money, I hardly know what you are talking about, Breffit," said Broke, becoming so bewildered that he was getting a little angry also. "Of course, you may depend upon it that I shall take the first opportunity of—ah—discharging the—ah—obligation Mrs. Broke is under to you. I hope there will be enough left over from the lease of No. 3, Broke Street, to clear off that. In the course of a week or two, Breffit, I—ah—trust you will be repaid."

"Of course, sir—yes, yes, of course. But—er—that is

not exactly what I mean. Really—er—that has little or nothing to do with it."

"Breffit, I cannot understand you. What else have we been talking about? I certainly understood you to be propounding a scheme by which I—ah—could pay off the debt in a manner convenient to us both. You have not made it very clear, but—ah—I don't doubt it is excellent. Your schemes in the way of business are generally excellent."

"They are, I hope and trust, sir. But if you will pardon my saying it, sir, I think you have got hold of the wrong end of the stick. It is not a paltry little matter of a few hundreds of pounds that I am talking of, in the first place. We will leave that out of the question altogether. You have six daughters, and—er—I have one son, sir; and my son, sir, speaking plainly, is pretty well off at the present moment, and has this place in which to live. In confidence, Mr. Broke, I think it is only right to tell you that I have made over this house to him in my own lifetime, and fastened rather more than a quarter of a million upon him for the upkeep of it. And I may say that at my decease there will be another quarter of a million for him in addition, or even more; but what he has already should be more than enough for him to marry on and lead the life of a gentleman. According to its present investments it means something like thirty thousand a year, sir; and should his wife object to my presence in this house, I being a simple and homely man, sir, and always have been, like my father before me, I am quite prepared to go back to the little hole at Cuttisham above my office, where I have lived for forty years."

In an impatience of spirit that was no longer to be restrained Broke rose from his chair. Old Breffit was so persistently mysterious, so persistently unintelligible, that one would almost think his mind was giving way. He was certainly beginning to evince many signs of age. This was not the Breffit of Cuttisham he was wont to look to. This was not the far-seeing and acute man of business who, confining himself wholly to the affairs of his clients; had the knack of setting forth his thoughts in the most explicit manner. This was a new kind of Breffit alto-

gether: a halting, faltering, fumbling, prosing, nervously-autobiographical Breffit; an uneasy, aspiring, great-deal-too-familiar Breffit who gave himself airs. There could be no doubt that the acquisition of wealth was a curse to people who had not been bred to its enjoyment.

He could endure this farce no longer. He took up his hat and tapped his riding crop against his gaiters.

"Good morning, Breffit."

Mr. Breffit lifted his sweating face up to him in the stress of a last appeal.

"Surely, sir, you *do* understand me?"

"Confound it all, my dear fellow, what is there to understand?"

"That I want my son to marry one of your daughters—I don't care which," Mr. Breffit blurted out with the sudden and dramatic brevity of his great desperation.

Our hero stood a minute in deep silence, but with his mouth open wide and a face as purple as Mr. Breffit's own. Suddenly, and still without uttering a word, he crammed his hat on his head, swung upon his heel, and stalked out of the house at such a pace that he ran the imminent risk of knocking down a serious and splendid gentleman in the shape of a footman and trampling him beneath his feet.

CHAPTER XXV

Iphigenia

BROKE rode two miles at a brisk canter. He then for no visible reason reined up his horse, and burst out in a guffaw of laughter. The quality of this mirth was as singular as its manner. It had the hollowness of that a ghost might shake out of its thin sides, if confronted with its own reflection in a mirror in the middle of the night. There was no precise reason why at such a moment he should pause for amusement's sake, let alone to make it vocal; and the absence of motive lent a slightly irrelevant, a slightly ridiculous air to the proceeding. When he rode on again he appeared to be laughing at his own incongruous behaviour.

It was not until the evening of that day that he could screw up his resolution to the point of talking with his wife on the painful topic of her borrowing two thousand pounds from Mr. Breffit. The other consequences—the outcome, he supposed, of that rash act—he could not put before himself. Events had been moving too fast for him lately. His powerfully balanced and beautifully unemotional mental system was in danger of being shaken to its base if this sort of thing continued to go on. There was only a numb ache in that sensitive portion of him which rejoiced a fortnight ago in the possession of a living breathing actual son: Then a great green discoloration, a very bruise, was spreading over the no less sensitive part that was dedicated to his sovereign honesty. That Salmon business was a facer; but worse a hundred times, because of the hint of treachery implied in it, was this business of his wife

stooping to borrow money behind his back, with but a faint possibility of repaying it. As for the use old Breffit had proposed to himself to put it to, that was not a theme for serious minds. It belonged too palpably to the region of broad farce.

He was shocked by a suspicion of lightness in his wife's tone when with many hums and haws he confronted her with her misdemeanour. The borrowing of the two thousand pounds she admitted in as many words. She had seen what she thought to be a chance of snapping up an unconsidered trifle by means of speculation with a few shares. It had not come off; and there the thing was—such was her habit of philosophy. She was perfectly placid over it; not at all inclined to mingle her tears with the milk she had spilt.

"With a bit of luck it would have doubled itself, then I could have returned the money with two thousand pounds in hand, and no one would have been any the wiser. I have done it before. But we are dead out of luck this year."

"I—ah—don't like to hear you talk like that, Jane. It is as though you—ah—hardly understand the principle involved. You should have first consulted me."

"You!"

Her inveterate susceptibility to humour only half enabled her to check the ring of amusement in her tone.

"Yes, Jane, me. I am afraid you—ah—treat it too lightly. You should never have done a thing like that without my sanction."

"Wherefore, O Sapient?"

"In the first place I am a stickler for everything being straight and above board."

"I hardly concede your right, my dear Edmund, to intervene in my purely personal affairs."

"I—ah—think you will find that the law does."

Again she made the unsuccessful effort to conceal the pleasure she derived from his delicious pomposity.

"Has it never struck you, my dear Edmund, that to be perfectly literal with the Law of England is to be obsolete."

"I—ah—don't go into fine points. The fact, Jane, should

suffice that as long as you use my name I am responsible for the uses to which you may put it."

"Very well, my Edmund, for the sake of the argument I grant it; but I still reserve my right to forget it whenever I choose. Does the virtuous Mr. Breffit propose to adopt the rôle of Shylock?"

"He does."

"He proposes to sell us up?"

"No, he—ah—wants his pound of flesh more literally."

Our hero again suddenly broke forth into the guffaw he had checked his horse to employ. It burst out of him in just the same irrational fashion as in the country lane.

His wife was startled by it. She then noted that his eyes were slightly bloodshot. In his face she saw the expression of gray weariness that had been first observed there so recently. She had a pain; and for the moment all the fight went out of her.

It was Broke who made an end of the brief interval of silence that followed.

"We put ourselves in the power," he said, "of men like these and they do not hesitate to push their advantages home. I have had such an instance of the man's effrontery as you will hardly believe. I hardly believe it myself."

Mrs. Broke waited with a calm foreknowledge of what was coming. For accuracy of guessing she was famous.

"I—ah—don't know that it is worth while to tell you."

"You will be wise if you do."

"Very well. You may know that this fellow Breffit has put his son in Algernon's place with thirty thousand a year. Well, this morning he was kind enough to suggest—he says he—ah—doesn't mind which—that one of our girls should marry him."

Again the ghost laugh rang hollow in our hero. His wife looked at him patiently with a tender quizzical expression.

"I never guessed what an old ruffian he was until I saw him this morning in poor Algernon's place. He is completely changed. He is like the rest of his tribe: money has poisoned him. He was—ah—good enough to put me on an equality with himself. *Noblesse oblige*, you

know, Mr. Broke. I could hardly stand it; I—ah—nearly laughed in his face."

He passed his hands through his hair wearily.

"And how did you answer him, Edmund?"

"What could I? I—ah—took up my hat and bolted."

"I gather you did not err on the side of civility, my Edmund."

"The fellow got as much as he deserved—more!"

"Thirty thousand a year," she repeated wistfully.

"It makes it no better—worse if anything. It's a bribe."

"There is one phase of this matter, Edmund, of which you force me to remind you. A recent event has ruined us."

"In a sense I—ah—suppose it has."

"And that the primary. We must leave Covenden, or consent to be sold up."

"Surely we cannot be so far gone as that."

His voice had changed dramatically.

"You will find that to be the case. And I want you to bear in mind that Mr. Breffit is our largest creditor."

"But you forget No. 3. We are selling it on lease. Surely the money will help us to hold on for a bit."

"Edmund, do not deceive yourself. We are compromised far more deeply than I think you realise. Mr. Breffit's purse and his goodwill have been propping us up for several years. You are not so closely in touch with our affairs as I am. We are much farther gone than you think. For the last two years Mr. Breffit has only had to say the word for Covenden and all it contains to be sold over our heads."

"Why has the fellow not said it, then?"

"I will give you no more than two reasons. The first is I have put him off continually with appeals to his friendship and our hopes of Billy. The second I will leave you to guess for yourself."

"Impossible; I—ah—refuse to believe it. The fellow may be cunning, but he cannot have had the—ah—folly, the—ah—effrontery to play such a game as that. The man must be mad."

"Not mad, my Edmund. If madness there is in the matter it lies in us. The man merely moves with his age. This is the age of the democracy."

"Faugh! You disgust me."

"Again, my Edmund, for the hundred thousandth time it is my disagreeable duty to remind you that this is not the time of the Plantagenets. Persons like you are as obsolete as the feudal baron. The last of you had his head cut off by Oliver Cromwell. We are democrats all living in the golden age of the people. We must be prepared to offer up our Iphigenia on their altars."

"I don't know how you can talk so," said our hero, hoarsely. "It's blasphemous."

"We are confronted with the bitter truth. When Mr. Breffit made that suggestion this morning, he showed his hand. He could have added, and probably would have done had you waited to hear, 'Refuse me this and I sell you up!'"

"My God! you think that?"

"I am perfectly convinced of it."

Broke's chest sank; speech seemed to fail him. He was compelled to take what his wife said for granted. It was her duty to navigate the wretched vessel through these vast and deep seas of an infinite complexity. The requisite patience and subtlety were beyond him. Thus when the cold assurance fell from her lips he accepted it, fantastic, weird, awful as it was, with a faith that was unquestioning. The blow shook him to the roots.

"I should suggest Delia."

His wife's brevity was so pregnant in its abrupt intrusion on his thoughts that the unhappy gentleman was startled rather painfully out of the slough in which he was all but lost.

He shaped a word with his lips. So shaken was he that for the moment the power of articulation was not in him.

Mrs. Broke could interpret the word if she could not hear it.

"The matter is one of life and death," she said. "Shylock insists on his pound of flesh. He has only to speak and we are houseless and homeless. Covenden will probably become a shooting box for his son."

Implacably she watched the barb sink. The capacity he had so long admired in her of being able to act purely from considerations of expedience was standing her in good stead at this moment. She had made up her mind to be ruthless. Half measures would be fatal. The wretched victim must be pierced and mutilated if ultimately he was to issue forth to his salvation. His pride must be nailed to the tree.

"I suggest Delia."

"You don't know what you are saying, woman."

"You have six girls, but only one Covenden."

"Ugh! Breffit, shocking young cad."

"So I believe. The heathen deities are not nice."

"I cannot do it, I will not do it. The idea revolts me."

"You have considered fully the unhappy alternative?"

In his distress our hero rose from his chair to stride about the room. She watched his grotesque figure as it lurched up and down the carpet. There was a wan smile on her lips. A pair of wild horses had been hitched to the unyielding thing he called his pride, and she was looking on at the savage spectacle of it being rent asunder. Something of the sensation was hers of an ancient Roman witnessing a massacre of Christians in the amphitheatre.

The victim had to choose between the ancestral home of his race and one of the sacred emblems of it. He must sacrifice Covenden, or he must sacrifice a daughter. The horrid bloody Moloch when he makes his demand will not be fobbed off; he insists on the letter. The demand must be met with a strip of our flesh or the hot tears of our hearts.

"Why Delia?" he stopped suddenly to ask in the fierce height of his torment. "Why she more than another?"

"She is the youngest."

"That is no reason. Or if it is a reason it points the other way."

"She is not quite so dependable as the others."

"How? What do you mean?"

A fortnight ago he could not have brought himself to put such a question. But the phenomenal has only to

happen to us once to change us. The act of his son had smeared over and defaced for ever the beautifully ruled chart of human behaviour it had been his invariable habit to consult. Dating from that he had no bearings by which to go.

"Her tutor has done her no good, I regret to say."

"Tutor, tutor! What tutor? What do you mean?"

"I refer to the man Emma sent to coach her. The wretched child has fallen violently in love."

A fortnight ago he would probably have informed his wife she was a fool in just so many words, for permitting herself to evolve such a theory in regard to a daughter of his house. Now he could only resume his peregrination of the room with another nerve laid bare. The world in which he had lived for sixty peaceful years was falling in upon him. The dust of it was running up his nostrils and down his throat; it seemed to thick his blood. The débris was falling upon him too; mighty blocks of it had pinned him already. They were breaking his ribs against the very walls of his heart. If this sort of thing went on, his veins must snap and he would have to die.

With our hero continuing to stagger up and down the room and shaking it heavily with every fall of his foot, his wife withdrew her attention from his strange figure and wrote a letter. It was a brief note of invitation to Mr. Breffit the younger; it craved the pleasure of his company at luncheon at two o'clock on the following Saturday. On signing it she summoned him to read, while she addressed an envelope.

She finished her task a full two minutes before Broke had finished his, brief as it was. When he returned the note she was oppressed by the coldness of his hands.

"Give me a bit of time," he said in a voice she could hardly hear. "Time to think it over. Mustn't decide it to-night. No need to decide it to-night."

"Yes, Edmund, to-night. We must make up our minds here and now. We can then put it away from us once and for all. It is like having a tooth drawn, you know; have it pulled at the first twinge to save much pain."

"Yes, it's right I daresay. Always right, Jane, in these

things. But I am in no mood to-night. It's late. Save it until to-morrow. Our heads will be clearer."

"No, Edmund, to-night. Let us have done with it. It is the only way. We spare ourselves if we do."

Suddenly the tormented gentleman broke out in his more strident self.

"You shall not do it; upon my soul you shall not!"

He made a grab at the letter now in his wife's possession, tore it from her fingers, crushed it, and flung it among the ashes long since cold in the grate.

His wife met him with a straight figure and staunch eyes.

"You seal your doom, Edmund."

"Let them do their worst, and curse them."

He walked out of the room. The door slammed behind him. A little afterwards a second door slammed far away in the house. By the dull and heavy clang Mrs. Broke divined it to be the great door of the hall. She looked at the clock. It was five minutes to two of the May morning.

Deliberately she took up the pen for the second time, and rewrote word for word her invitation to Mr. Breffit. She then quitted the room, dropped the letter in the post-bag in the hall; and, proceeding to the housekeeper's room, deserted hours ago, struck a light, lit a spirit lamp, and made herself a cup of tea.

CHAPTER XXVI

In which Two Matrimonial Richmonds take the Field

THREE days later the crowning glory of England, its press, and the most radiant section of that emblem, the halfpenny journal, was selling like hot cakes with the aid of a spicy bill of fare. With pregnant Roman capitals as black as thunder, every sooty traveller of the Underground, every struggler for the omnibus, every patron of the Tube, every *habitué* of the Aerated Bread shop and chop house of the City was bidden to the banquet. There could be no doubt as to the stimulating nature of the feast. "A Thames Bubble—Collapse of the Thames Valley Goldfields Syndicate—Meeting of Shareholders—Stormy Scenes—Remarkable Speech of a Director."

Here was meat for the halfpenny clientèle to gloat upon!

Our hero's excursion into eloquence was reported entire. His periods were rounded and his coherence embellished by the arts of journalism, but nothing could bereave his utterances of their innate and peculiar quality and of the naïveté of him who gave them forth. As one organ took occasion to declare in a leading article, "The quaint spectacle of a guinea pig waving aloft the banner of purity, and calling down fire from heaven upon the heads of its kind, was enough to make the British public sit up and purr." The inciter of this feline feat awoke to find himself more notorious than he had ever been in his life before. The illustrated press came out with pictures of him in

varying forms and stages of the libellous; *Society Snapshots* had a short biography by A Fag whom He Had Kicked at Eton; and *Classy Cuttings* revealed to its readers the kind of shaving soap he used, and settled for ever the vexed question whether he wore his hair parted in the middle or at the side.

It was May now, and the deepest gloom seemed to have settled on the family of Covenden. There was to be no London season for them this year, with the exception of Delia, who had been condemned to spend a fortnight at Grosvenor Street with Aunt Emma that she might be presented, and who would, as she vowed with inexpressibly bitter tears, have preferred to stay at home. Not that she was any happier at home. Her loss of colour and animation had been commented upon by other people as well as her Uncle Charles. There appeared to be nothing in which she took an interest. Indeed, as the days passed her pinched and listless look grew too obvious to be disregarded.

Too well did her sisters know the cause of her unhappiness. But they withheld their pity; indeed, they were filled with scorn. The reflection upon themselves was by far the most grievous they had ever had to bear. They could hardly believe it of one who in external things resembled them one and all so exactly; in one whom nature must have designed to be one of their clan. They could only ascribe it to her having those films to her eyes, and those lashes that curled up at the ends. They were humbly grateful that they were without them, now that they saw what the possession of them meant. If, as they shrewdly supposed, such things as films and curling eyelashes were allowed by judges to be marks of beauty, as were pricked ears in a bull terrier or bowed legs in a bull-pup, they began to see the force of that adage with which they were wont to console themselves: that if you were beautiful, it was very difficult to be good. Not that in their own opinion their youngest sister was any less ugly than anybody else.

In any case they remained inflexible. She was sent to Coventry for an indefinite period, and it was only after Joan had taken a whole day to think the matter over that

she was allowed to retain her privileges in regard to their common room.

"It is only because of her youth," said that justiciary, delivering judgment before the court. "If it were not this room should be forbidden her."

A slight sigh of relief was heard to pass round the earnest assembly, and Harriet rose hurriedly to quit it lest anybody should see there were tears in her eyes.

The same Spartan resolution was extended to Billy, the hero with the godlike attributes, whose radiance had dazzled them from the time they first crawled on the nursery floor. It tore their very hearts, but anything in the nature of a command from their father was their highest conception of law. So obedient were they to his mandate on the cruel subject, that not only did they refrain from breathing the name of their brother in his presence, but by a tacit consent it was banished in their private intercourse. Delia, it is true, had so far forgotten herself as to mention it once, but such terrible freezing glances had she received for her pains that they did not think she would venture to do so again. Their mother also had certainly spoken of him several times in their hearing. But their perfect loyalty to their father forbade their taking pleasure in these occasions. They could not even hale them with relief. Their brother's name in the mouth of their mother was lacking in authenticity. It had never been possible for them to exalt her to the side of their father in the shrine of their idolatry. In her way she was perhaps more dignified, more unapproachable, and less easy to get on with; but with all these gifts she had not that natural, impregnable, lofty splendour as had he. The truth was that no human being had: Their father had that innate and native something that rendered him supreme. The king could do no wrong. He was all justice, all wisdom, all charity, all tenderness and watchful love. If he had asked one of them to place her right hand between the glowing bars of the fire, she would have done so at once, and have kept it there unflinchingly until told to take it out. They hardly knew in what degree they were mortifying their instincts by banishing the fair image of their brother. But their deity demanded it; they asked no more.

Their mother's conduct in the matter was far otherwise. She spoke of him openly, and had even suggested that it would give her pleasure if they made a pilgrimage to the cottage on the hill to see his wife. It would have given them pleasure, too, because whatever their father's behests; the vital fact could not be strangled in their hearts that Billy was Billy still. Even the mightiest law-giver cannot induce in us oblivion of what once has been. And again they had a natural curiosity to gaze upon the creature who had wrought their brother's ruin. Extravagant pictures of her were in their minds. They would have paid their shillings to behold her with even greater eagerness than those they paid to behold the blue-nosed ape in the menagerie that came every year to Cuttisham Fair. The pictures in their minds coincided exactly with that variety of monster. Less uncompromising types of conscience might have found it easy to provide an excuse to look upon her, but the mandate of the one authentic oracle must be obeyed not in the letter merely, but in the spirit.

Delia returned from London less happy if possible than when she went away. To every reasonable and right-thinking girl the experiences crowded into that fortnight would at least have been exciting. But the child, as her aunt wrote to her mother immediately on her return, in a letter not overburdened by delicacy, had been wholly dull, uninterested, and uninspired by dances and parties, and even the Drawing-room itself. Although Joan's dress, altered the season before last to fit Jane, had been altered again so cunningly—she was nearer in size to Jane than any of the rest—that it fitted her to perfection, and a court hair-dresser had come specially out of Bond Street and had done her hair in a beautiful manner, and her aunt had lent her a string of pearls to put round her throat, as the child had none of her own, the maid who had dressed her was prepared to swear that she could not be induced to look in the cheval glass at the figure she presented. As her aunt said, such an unnatural child never was known. Again it was averred that she went through the ceremony without asking a question or betraying the least curiosity, without getting flurried or exhibiting any perturbation

at all. Even when she made her curtsey to the Presence, and touched the rather fat hand of Royalty with her lips, she displayed no symptom of nervousness, nor blushed; nor hesitated, nor showed the slightest disposition to trip over her train. As her aunt said, her conduct all through the day was unbelievable, unchristian, and quite unworthy of human nature. She could only explain it on the assumption that she wanted iron.

All the same it was hardly likely that iron, invaluable as that commodity was known to be, could prevail against inherent weakness of mind. Unmistakable evidences of the fell symptom had been discovered by her lynx-eyed patroness. There could be little doubt it was the result of that pernicious system of inter-marriage which so long had been the bane of old families. Even now the gifted but eminently practical lady had been moved to write a brochure on the painful subject; it would hit the House of Lords harder than it had ever been hit before. Also it would hit it in its tenderest spot. In the melancholy circumstances her aunt had come to the conclusion, reluctantly to the conclusion, that it would be futile, a waste of time and money, to seek to ameliorate her mental state by sending her to a seat of female learning. At the conclusion of a long and energetically worded letter, Lady Bosket said that never before had it been brought home to her with such overwhelming force what the disadvantages were under which her sister-in-law laboured in the acquisition of men to marry her girls. If men would put up with that kind they would put up with any. Even the least hopeless, the least impossible of them all, presumably the flower, had proved on a closer inspection to be weak of mind.

Delia, although she returned duly fortified with the possession of a box of iron tablets, and a certificate testifying to the weakness of her mental character, seemed nowise the better for either. Nor had her glimpse of the London season done anything to redeem her personal appearance. The rings round her eyes, the only tolerable features about her, were more marked than ever. Her cheeks were paler; she was more lackadaisical, and she could hardly be got to utter a word. Her conversation

alternated between the limits of yes and no, a rather abrupt mental range that lent colour to the uncompromising theory of her aunt. She went off to walk all day by herself, only reappearing at the hours set apart for meals, and when she did so it was only a formal act in her, for she made no pretences of eating them. Not only did she shun the society of her sisters, but also that of every human being.

There was one slight alteration in her, however, which her sisters allowed to be for the better. She no longer permitted herself that undue, that licentious indulgence in tears. They did not lie so near the surface; quite a chance allusion would no longer call them forth; while it was to be deduced from the absence of a red inflammation about her eyelids that she did not spend so many hours in her bedroom in private weepings. It could at least be said of her that she had brought back a keener sense of decency from the London season.

One day a strange man sat down to luncheon with them, a man whom they could not remember to have seen before. He was a rather good-looking person, young, handsome in a florid style; he was very carefully dressed, his every hair was in place. Mr. Breffit was his name, and their father, as so often of late was his wont, hardly said a word throughout the meal. Their mother, as was usual with her when there was a stranger present, was in great conversational feather, and singularly enough she made one or two quite flattering references to Delia, who had the strange man for her neighbour, and seemed to insist in her delicate way that Delia should converse with him. Their surprise and consternation were complete. Never before had one of them, not even Joan herself, been singled out for public notice by the august president of their destinies. And Delia of all people!

"The child is so shy," said her mother to Mr: Breffit with a delightful ringing laugh, and it had that note of archness in it which showed she was at her best; "a man always overawes her. He has the effect the mouse had on little Miss Muffet. Was it a mouse or a spider, I am sure I forget? Now, Mr. Breffit, I look to you not to

frighten her away, Speak to her nicely, and then she will understand that you are not going to bite her."

Almost immediately Mr. Breffit made an impassioned allusion to the weather.

It was their mother, however, who had to sustain the chief share in the talk. Without her aid there would have been hardly any conversation at all. Delia, in spite of her new honours, never allowed herself to go beyond the limits prescribed by her habitual "yes" and "no." Mr. Breffit also did not seem to be gifted with powers of any remarkable range. He confined himself to one topic mainly, and that a rather abstruse one, on which, to do him justice, he really talked very well. Did they know So-and-So of Such-and-Such? He was a very old and cherished friend of his. He had just been spending a fortnight at Such-and-Such. The number of people who hankered for him as a guest was wonderful; his comments upon them and their houses were very flattering indeed, so that his conversation was not unlike and just as entertaining as a society newspaper read aloud. And when he was not effusive he could be patronizing. His amiable vein of patronage was placed at the service of those persons who scarcely could be said to be fixed stars in the shining circle of which he himself was a planet. When he mentioned them, as by the gentle but unseen arts of his hostess he was led to do presently, he revealed a not unpleasing little gift of satire.

"But, after all, one doesn't know them, you know, although one runs up against them sometimes," was a phrase he enunciated with a gusto that charmed her.

"You were at Cambridge?"

"Oh yes; three years at Trinity, mostly wasted I am afraid."

"Forgive me if I differ. Did you meet a young man of the name of Porter, may I ask? He was of your college, and, I believe, contemporary."

"Porter—Porter." Mr. Breffit knitted his brows in deep meditation. "Porter—let me see. I seem to know the name; but Trinity, of course, is not a small college. I believe there was a man of that name who rowed bow in one of the boats."

Mr. Breffit pondered profoundly.

"He comes from Cuttisham. His father is a bookseller there. No, I suppose you would not."

"No, of course," said Mr. Breffit with alacrity. "It is hardly likely."

"Still, as he came from this neighbourhood, and he went to the same college about the same time, I thought you might perhaps. I am interested in him because he is a sort of protégé of my sister-in-law. She predicts great things of him. I refer, of course, to Lady Bosket, the author of *Poses in the Opaque*. I think I betray no secret when I say that he owes it to her that he found his way to Cambridge."

"Porter, Porter—ah, yes, of course I remember. There was a man of the name of Porter, now you mention him; a very harmless, quiet, reading man, although I can hardly recall him."

"I should think he would be. But I gather that you did not know him very intimately."

"Not very."

Mr. Breffit added to the significance of his tone a gesture of polite deprecation.

"A recluse probably?"

"I really don't know, but I should say he was."

"Was he well thought of in the University?"

"I really don't know, but I should say not."

"You surprise me. My sister-in-law will be disappointed if he does not do well."

"It is quite probable he was clever. Outsiders mostly are."

Her object achieved, Mrs. Broke changed the topic.

"How is your father?"

In spite of the armour of his self-esteem, the young man was disconcerted by the suddenness of the question. He relapsed upon a slight uneasiness, which in one of his splendid self-possession was not expected. Under her perfectly frank and demure gaze a shade of tawny deepened in him.

"I have not had the pleasure of seeing him for quite a long time," she said, to soften a certain awkwardness in the pause.

"I was not aware that you knew him," said Mr. Breffit languidly.

"He has been a particular friend of Mr. Broke's for twenty years."

"Oh yes, I daresay."

There was a faint but firm implication in the air of Mr. Breffit that he would thank her to dismiss the subject.

Our hypercritical young gentleman had already made up his mind that he had never been so bored in his life. He supposed that old county families were all very well in their way, but if this menage was a fair average specimen of what they were in general, long might he be spared from contact with them! To begin with, the place itself seemed to smell of about three centuries behind the present. The musty old-world atmosphere was excellent doubtless, but he was not sure whether he would not prefer to dispense with a few links in his pedigree, and rub along without it. There was the pompous overbearing old bird of a father at the far end of the massive mahogany, who never by any chance spoke a word to anybody, but swilled ale and gobbled away at beef with a very wide mouth, a kind of combination of a butcher and a farmer, with a face the colour of a piece of raw liver, and a nose on him like the handle of a door. Then there were half a dozen girls, whom he took to be his daughters, without exception the ugliest set of women he had ever seen. They were all nose and elbow. They, too, never by any chance opened their mouths except for purposes of eating, which, to do them justice, they did with marked effect. One of them sat beside him, and when he tried to talk to her she said "yes" and "no." However, to give credit where credit was due, the mother *was* a bit better. You would not exactly call *her* a beauty, but she did not seem to be such a bad old sort. She was rather pleasant to talk to, although she had a foolish habit of asking questions.

Still all these disabilities paled their significance before the luncheon. He could truthfully say, speaking out of a long and varied experience, it was the very worst lunch to which he had ever sat down. The one they chucked at you at Lord's for half-a-crown was a repast by comparison. No table napkins, no knives for the fish,

no vegetables, hardly a decent salad, tough mutton, and underdone beef, ale only fit for harvesters, and claret only fit for the pigs. There was nothing else. If there was anything else you wanted you had to go without. The servants, too, seemed as uppish as the devil, and as slow as a funeral. It was a lunch you would have thought anybody would have been ashamed to put on, and how people in the position they were supposed to occupy had the face to do it he did not know. If this was what being before the Conquest meant, thank God his poor, dear old father was such a shocking old bounder!

Our hypercritical young friend was thus far gone in personal discomfort, when the invasion of the room, by two men he had never seen before, served to distract his attention from his immediate needs. One was an oldish, misshapen, funny-looking little cove, in shabby tweeds and cloth gaiters, with a straw in his mouth. Your first impression of him was that he was a groom down on his luck who was looking for a job. Your impression was confirmed when you noticed how bleared his eyes were, and how fat was his nose. Drink had been his downfall; there could be no doubt about that.

The man who came with him was also a rum-looking fellow. He was a meek and mild young old man of thirty-five or so, with an earnest and perplexed expression. He was very pale, and thin and high in the shoulders. His peaked face had a very anxious look upon it, and was subject occasionally to a grotesque nervous contortion. His narrow flat-chested appearance suggested that he had only one lung. He followed on the heels of the drunken groom with the straw, and Mrs. Broke beckoning to him, he was good enough to come and sit next to our observant young friend, who, with the swift insight into men and things that had long been a source of pride to its possessor, had diagnosed him already as the local curate.

"I have brought Harry," said the man with the straw in a hoarse loud voice. "We should ha' stayed over at the Court only their whisky is so poisonous. Last time I said never again; besides, Harry wanted to come and see you. And how's my little cockyoly birds? All

quite well thank you, Uncle Charles, and hope you are the same—what ?"

The funny old bounder took a seat in the midst of the girls some distance away, rather to the relief of young Mr. Breffit, who, however, noted with envy that the old swell of a butler came forward with far more alacrity than he had yet exhibited, with a jar of whisky and a syphon of soda water. Groom or no groom, the man with the straw was devilish lucky to be able to escape that ale and claret in this manner.

In the meantime the young-old man was beaming with anxious gravity upon his hostess. It was a stereotyped and conventional gesture, and he performed it with a dogged solemnity as of one doing his duty.

"Charmed to see you about again, Harry," said Mrs. Broke, with an affectionate smile accompanied by a most motherly tone. "How is the poor dear chest ? Is it two lungs still, or do you now pin your faith on one ?"

"One and a bit," said Harry, in a wheezy whisper.

"I congratulate you on the bit. How tenacious of you. To my knowledge you have held on to that bit for the last ten years."

"I want to do the right thing," said the young-old man in a whisper wheezier than ever. "They tell me it will be inconvenient if I give up, so I am doing what I can to stay on."

"Then that is why you wintered at Davos ? What a devotion to duty !"

"His rector must think a lot of him if he sent him to Davos," his neighbour made the comment to himself.

"Do you think so ?" said the young-old man. "I always try to do the right thing."

"My dear Harry, why assure one of that ? Everybody knows it. One never thinks of you without recalling to one's mind poor dear Nelson. He copyrighted that phrase about 'England expects,' but one feels all the time that it is a plagiarism from your life with its singleness of aim and integrity of purpose."

Mrs. Broke opened her blue eyes to their widest and beamed upon him. A tinge of colour came into the young-old man's wan cheeks, and he smiled faintly.

"I think duty is so beautiful," Mrs. Broke went on. "After all, the unfaltering performance of it is the only thing that reconciles us to our lot. Without it existence would indeed be hollow. One wonders, Harry, that more people have not dedicated their lives to it, as you have done. We should be a happier, a healthier, a more stable race."

"Harry is the happiest, healthiest, and most stable devil I ever saw," said Lord Bosket, at the other end of the table, in an aside to Broke.

"Surely he can't last long,"

"I don't know, he's a queer bird. Everybody has said for the last ten years that he can't last long, but here he is still drinkin' draught stout and playin' patience. He wheezes a bit more than he did in Mary's time, poor soul, but he still hangs on. And I think he will as long as he makes his mind up to it. I never saw such a feller for makin' up his mind."

"I should want to give in, if I was like that."

"Oh, I daresay *he* does. But his people think he ought to hang on as long as he can to shut Algernon out. They want him to marry again as Mary didn't come off. I'm not sure that that's not what has brought him here now. I know one of our little fillies was suggested, and it struck me it would do you no harm, Edmund, eh? She won't have to wait long to be a dowager, because I'll lay a thousand to five that as soon as the poor devil gets what he wants he will hand in his checks. It is a miracle how he keeps on. It wouldn't take many of those bad coughings and hemorrhages to settle me. Personally, I think it is rotten of his people to trouble the poor devil. Why can't they give him leave to go and be at peace? But they are all dead set against Algernon now. They won't have him at any price; and they tell me this Mrs. Dingley is a beauty."

Broke was lost in deep thought for a minute, and then he said: "I—ah—don't fancy a fellow like that for one of our girls. It seems a bit unnatural to me. Does Jane know?"

"She guesses all right. Catch Jane missin' a chance. She's spoken to me once or twice about Algernon's business, and the Raynes' affairs generally. Real fly is the name for her; if I was as fly as our Jane I should turn my talents

to the Turf and make a bit. Look at her making love to him now, Edmund."

Mrs. Broke was even yet dilating to the Duke of Wimbledon on the sacred character of duty. That hollow-cheeked and weary-eyed knight of the Garter nodded his head slowly in response, at automatic intervals. Plainly he took the responsibilities, the enjoyment of our mundane existence cast upon him with a becoming seriousness. They appeared to begin and end in a doing of the right thing. Every act he performed was marked out according to that convention. The hypercritical young gentleman who sat beside him, in whose case there was the excuse of the hard necessity, could not have been more pedantically correct in every detail of his demeanour. His anxiety to do the right thing was stamped on every line, and they were many, of his earnest countenance. His nervous hands hovered about the table-cloth perpetually lest anybody should be in need of salt. When Philippa asked him to pass the butter he quite overwhelmed her with apologies because he had failed to observe she was in need of it. His manner was a scrupulous compliment to everybody present. His desire to give satisfaction was so immense. His countenance might be stamped with every sign of affliction, but it was far from being reflected in his animated courtesy. He was hat in hand to all. He bent his narrow back to everybody, as though his mission in life was to propitiate each individual person with whom he came into contact.

After having discussed with his hostess for ten minutes the sacred character of duty, it was in the pursuit of this scheme of conduct that he turned to the young man by his side, with whom he had not as yet exchanged a word.

"Awfully nice day," he said, in his wheeziest whisper.

"U—u—m—m?"

Our young friend made a buzz like a bee humming. He had heard what his neighbour had said perfectly well, but he was not in the mood to engage in a discussion of the weather with the local curate.

"Awfully nice day," his neighbour repeated gently.

"Nice day. Very."

"Do you play golf?"

"Do I play golf? No. Why should I? Do you?"

" No, I do not."

" Hunt ? "

" No, I do not."

" Shoot ? "

" No, I do not."

" Yacht ? "

" No, I do not."

" Cricket ? "

" No, I do not."

" Anything you do do ? Ping-pong, barred of course."

" I like a game of patience."

" You like a game of patience. Yes, I daresay you would. Here ! "

Our young friend turned his back abruptly on his neighbour, and beckoned to the butler, who approached at a majestic leisure.

" Get me another glass of beer, will you."

The young-old man turned his anxious face to the butler.

" Do you happen," he said, ingratiatingly, " to have brown stout on draught ? "

" We have brown stout, your grace, on draught, or we have it bottled," said the butler with solemn courtliness.

" Do you mind getting me a pint of draught ? "

The butler bowed.

" And do you mind bringing it in a jug, with a bit of froth. I like a bit of froth."

" Thank you, your grace."

Your grace ! What did the old fool mean ? our friend asked of himself. This was no duke, and he was too young to be an archbishop. But, your grace ! If this was a duke, he was the rummest duke he had ever seen, or heard of, or read of. What price a duke who played patience and drank draught stout ? However, he was among rum people. They had the reputation of being swells in their way. There was just an outside sporting chance that he might not be the local curate after all. It would be wise to make sure. For that purpose he turned to the daughter of the house, who sat at his right hand.

" I say," he said, in a whisper, " who is the sportsman on my left ? "

" The Duke of Wimbledon," said Delia.

Well, he was damned! A pretty low down trick to play on a fellow, to dump a real live duke down at his side, and never to let him know. Here was a pretty go; he must make a dash for it while there was still a chance. Lunch was getting on. He gave the noble valetudinarian a nudge.

"I say duke, I suppose you would know my great friend Lord Alfred Shovehalfpenny, eldest son, you know, of the Earl of Coddam."

Yes, the duke had the felicity of knowing Shovehalfpenny, also his father, Lord Coddam. That was luck. He had got off the mark with a flying start. He would now proceed to make the pace a cracker. Did he know Lord Huffey? Yes, the duke knew Huffey. With that further success our friend grew a little uplifted. He settled down to serious work, squared his elbows, and cornered his man. And to think they had never told him!

Huffey, Huffey's place, and Huffey's people were passed under review for the delectation of the weary young-old man, who listened with rapt attention and nodded his head, and said "yes!" and "oh, yes!" at all the right and reasonable intervals, although he hardly knew Huffey from Adam, had not the least interest in Huffey, and had seen Huffey only once in his life.

Our young gentleman gave him no quarter however. From Huffey he passed to Puffey, another common friend, and then to Duffey and then to Snuffey, and then to Tuffey, and so on, and so on, quite a considerable distance into the devious branches of Toffeedom, that mighty order. The meek and inoffensive victim, who had never so much as harmed a fly in all the thirty-five years of his life, bore the remorseless Mr. Breffit the younger with the stoicism bred of constant affliction. He listened with his ears bent slightly forward that he might not miss a word, and his thin chest and pale blue chin protruded in polite earnestness towards his pitiless tormentor. It was an angelic patience. Balzac, when he fashioned his pathetic phrase about genius, might with equal force have rendered it, "La patience angelique des ducs."

Secure in the impression he was creating—it was plain for all to see that his auditor was ravished by the brilliancy of his talk—Mr. Breffit rose in the intoxication of success

to higher flights. Presently, to the immense satisfaction of himself, he had claimed an intimate acquaintance with half the peerage. It was as good as reading the celebrated work of Sir Horatio Hare. He drew the line, however, at the brewing department, and the Jewish department, leaving out the family of Rothschild, in whose favour he was able to make an exception, as they were the friends of Royalty. Nearly all the rest were his closest friends. Would that he could have said they were his second cousins in the words of the immortal Sir Horatio! But at least they could never do enough for him, and their houses were always at his disposal. When the time came to leave the table, oblivious of everything, and most of all of the particular mission that had brought him there, our young friend linked his arm through his companion's, for all the world as though he had known the dear delicate fellow all his life, indeed, as though they had been boys together.

His success was complete. It was the mightiest conquest he had ever made; it was the biggest fish he had ever landed. And to think they had not had the common decency to tell him at the start! If he had not had marvellous tact he might never have recovered from that bad beginning. But what a magic, what a glamour there was in Lord Alfred Shovehalfpenny and his father, the Earl of Coddam! They had never failed to pull him through. Drunk with what he had done already, he felt he must go on and on, ever on and on. He would play for all he was worth. With a thrill of satisfaction he bethought him of his little place. His old father, shocking old bounder as he was, was a wise old bird. He knew a thing or two. He showed a true instinct when he purchased Tufton. This was where his little place came in.

"You must come and see me at Tufton you know, duke. You must really. I can't take a refusal."

The nervous lath of veins and bones he still retained in his hand quivered and seemed almost to struggle a weak instant in the grasp of our young friend.

"Tufton," he murmured, dreamily. "You live at Tufton?"

"Don't you know?" said Mr. Breffit, in a tone of delicate expostulation. "It is mine now. I took it off the hands

of one of my oldest friends, Lord Algernon Raynes. You know poor old Algy, of course. Everybody knows poor old Algy. You must have heard, everybody's heard, of what a frightful mucker the poor old fellow came over that dashing little widow at Monte Carlo. His people are quite cut up, poor devils. It is awfully rough for them of course, as they are not overburdened with the goods of this world in that family, as I daresay you know. There is no saying what they would have done had not a friend of the family come forward in the nick of time to take Tufton off their hands."

His companion turned half round to take a better look at our young friend.

"You have bought Tufton," he said. "Is your name Breffit may I ask?"

There was a degree of embarrassment visible in the manner of the head of the Raynes family when he put this question, but at least it was no greater than that with which Mr. Breffit answered it.

"Ye—es," he said irresolutely. "Hamilton Breffit is my name."

A strange weary smile flickered an instant in the pale face of his victim.

"It was good of you to come to our aid," he said earnestly. "I am sure we are deeply sensible of your father's kindness. We might have had it on our hands a long time if he had not made his offer. I daresay, if we could have afforded to wait we might have got three times as much for it as we sold it for, but nevertheless I am sure we are grateful to your father for his promptness."

A tremendous pang had already taken our young friend somewhere behind at the back of his brain. Ye gods, what a purler! He was completely knocked out. To think when he made his grab at the bait, to think when he made his effort and went in to win, that he had not had the sense to pause and remember that the Duke of Wimbledon was a Raynes! Why, oh, why had he not left him at the local curate?

The feeling, the one most dreaded, the one most avoided, by elegant Englishmen of the type of our young friend, the feeling that he "had completely given himself away,"

had taken him by the throat. While he was writhing in its clutch the noble valetudinarian gathered enough of initiative very gently to disengage his arm. Before our young friend had recovered a sufficient measure of his self-possession he made good his escape into the tenderer hands of the awaiting Mrs. Broke which were outstretched to receive him.

By the time our somewhat crestfallen young friend had been able to pull himself a little together, he made straight for his hostess.

"I must be going," he said. "Thank you very much for a charming lunch."

"Must you go? Can't you stay?"

Mrs. Broke gave our young friend her hand with no absence of alacrity. It was not convenient to pay the requisite amount of attention to him just then. Higher game had appeared upon the scene.

As our young friend swung down the drive at a furious pace, he swore a great oath that all the king's horses and all the king's men should not induce him to set foot in that house again.

CHAPTER XXVII

Opportunities for a little Moral Teaching

ONE morning Mrs. Broke summoned Delia to her room. A large basket laden with flowers was on the table.

"I want you to take this to the cottage on the hill. Be careful. There are eggs underneath."

An implicit obedience being as much an instinct with Delia as with her sisters, she did not pause to allow questions to surge on her lips. She took the basket and set forth.

"That child looks wretchedly worn and ill" was her mother's comment as she closed the door. "It seems as though this little hothouse of a world of ours is getting too high a temperature."

To Delia this command of her mother's seemed directly to break down the barrier that had been erected between them and the dwellers in that sinister little cottage. But she would have been much easier in her mind had the command been her father's; although the sensation paramount in her at first was that of her mighty curiosity. She was craving to look upon the creature who had wrought the ruin of her brother, as does a child to look upon some fearsome animal in a zoological garden. And there was a similar idea of the peril. If she approached too closely it might turn and rend her, for no doubt it was very fierce.

Still the dim sense she had that in obeying her mother she was disobeying her father rendered her unhappy as she took her way. She could penetrate far enough into the minds of her parents dimly to apprehend that they did not always see eye to eye; and that in the present

diverseness of their points of view to serve one might be to be disloyal to the other. For that reason she devoutly hoped she would not meet her father now. She did not take the short way, therefore, across the home farm, so great was the danger of meeting him in that vicinity, but went the longer road, a difference of half a mile.

She had feelings of guilt when she found herself in sight of the cottage with no longer the acute fear of detection. Indeed, she felt in her heart she had been disloyal to her father, and was not sure as she lifted the latch of the cottage gate that she would not have preferred to be found out. She was bitterly angry with herself for having walked the longest way to avoid him. However, hardly had she set foot on the small path, skirted with flowers on either side, which led to the abode of Billy's wife, when she was startled by the tones of a man coming through the open door. Before she could guess to whom they might belong a familiar and beloved form filled the doorway. It was Billy.

At the mere sight of him, with the bright sun forming a halo round his fair head, all nicely-calculated forms of conduct vanished.

"Hallo, it is little Del!" he cried with the great shout of a boy. 'Little Del has come to see us. You dear kid: how ripping of you!"

He made the same rude proprietary grab at her as when he used to romp with them of old. With the same vigorous dexterity he caught her with one hand, and with the other tore the basket from her.

"They are eggs," she had the presence of mind to gasp.

"You dear kid!"

He slapped her cheek in a proud manner of ownership, and planted a lusty kiss upon it.

Delia had to make the effort to keep the tears from showing in her eyes. He had not changed in the least. Billy was Billy still: the same free-hearted, laughing, fearless, careless, insolently tender brother who loved them every one and whom every one of them loved too; the brother who had only to walk in moist earth for his sisters to fall upon their knees in adoration of his footprints. He was the same brother who had rolled them in hay a thou-

sand times; who had chased them round the buildings of the farm; who had made them hide from him in barns and corn cribs, lofts and mangers, and the strangest places; who had shown them a lead over the stiffest fences, and whose line they were prepared to follow to the end of the world, and through eternity. The old magic was in him still of making them laugh from their very hearts, of kindling a new light in their eyes.

"Come on in," he said, squeezing her small figure, and half carrying, half dragging her through the door of the cottage, exactly in the manner that he used to convey them as his prisoners two at a time in those strong arms of old. "My old little girl must see my new little girl, eh?"

In this uncompromising fashion the rather frightened, if joyously excited, Delia was conducted to view the fierce creature.

"Here she is," cried Billy. "Isn't she a little beauty? Kiss her, Del, and tell her that she is."

The two young creatures met one another irresolutely with their eyes. They were both afraid, both filled with wonder and bewilderment. They were as shy and distrustful as two strange kittens on the same hearthrug. But Alice gave back first. She was even timider than Delia; and she was soon shrinking from the honest searching gaze of Billy's sister, who was looking for a trace of the horrid monster she had expected to discover. The creature before her was nothing more formidable than a child, peculiarly fragile, peculiarly fair. A blush spread over Alice; suddenly her eyes fell, and at that moment she could not have held them up again to save her life. But almost directly an emotion conquered Delia. She ran forward and clutched the shrinking Alice to her arms with a little cry. A kiss mingled with tears she yielded to the delicate scarlet face.

The old woman, the aunt, stood in the background of the wall to watch in the extremity of awe. There was a measure of reticence in Billy too. But there was also gratitude. Delia's act, the more spontaneous because half reluctant, made its appeal. And the sight of his young wife and his young sister in one another's arms

seemed to emphasise the debt he owed his mother. He guessed it was by her agency that Delia was there.

Without his mother he saw that things might have gone much harder with Alice. It was she who had installed her in that place. Also she had visited her once or twice, he gathered; had furnished the cottage; had given her a little money, and had made her sundry small gifts. Also she had brought Maud Wayling there, and, afterwards, little as such a thing was to have been expected of her, Maud had come there once or twice of her own accord. From the eager inquiries that he made he learned that his mother and Miss Wayling had been more than kind. But with all his wish to do so, he could not learn that one of his sisters had taken the least interest in his wife: He felt that more keenly than he cared to own. Not once had they been to the cottage. The only solace that fact could afford was that they were acting unmistakably under the orders of their father.

The letter he had received from his father he had half expected. His instincts told him the sort of man his father was should it be your misfortune to cross him on a point of that sort. For all practical purposes it was all up with him. He was about done for as far as England was concerned. At any rate his father had done for him in the Blues. He had already resigned his commission, and there was just that bit of perverse pride about him that prevented his trying to get an exchange into a less expensive branch of the Service. Besides, his means would not permit him to follow a military calling and to keep a wife as well. Two hundred pounds a year! A dinner or two at the Carlton, and a supper or two at the Savoy, and where was that? No man in the world could exist decently on two hundred a year, let alone keep a wife on it. It was plain that his father knew there was no meat on that bone when he threw it at him.

Now he had a little scheme. He had already made up his mind that the best thing he could do was to go out to the colonies and try and earn an honest penny. He could not stand beggary in England, probably with all his former friends pointing a finger at him, and giving him the cold shoulder. No; South Africa was the place, so he had

heard. There was a big future for that country. You had only to look at the crop of millionaires it raised annually. You did hear wonderful stories of what men as poor as himself had done out there. Look at that chap Rhodes. If only he could have a bit of luck at the start like those other chaps had had!

If only he could return in a year or two and dispense with his father's bounty altogether! That was where the shoe pinched at present. If he had had anything at all on which to keep his wife he would have gone barefoot rather than accept a penny! His polo ponies and his kit had gone to cover what he owed, and you could hardly say that they had fulfilled their mission. There was still his tailor, wretched ruffian. It made him groan to think he had to take his father's bounty for his little girl.

However, it would not be for long. He was going to sail for South Africa to-morrow. His poor little girl had been dreadfully cut up over his plan. She could hardly be got to see things in the same light that he saw them himself; she was sure they could exist without her husband having to go away to foreign parts to seek money. To her, poor little kid! two hundred pounds a year was princely, especially with a cottage to live in rent free. But she was brave. And her docility and her devotion were very great. His absence would try her bitterly; but she was prepared to suffer if only he who knew so much more about everything held it wise and right. He had sought to comfort her with the promise that if he had the least bit of luck his first act would be to return for her and her aunt.

To-morrow he must leave her. He was sure it would not be for long. Like his mother, he had a vein of cheery optimism, a resolute looking at the right side of a subject that had always carried him through. And when it was necessary he too could exhibit a certain stoicism of spirit, after the fashion of his race.

That Delia should have come there that morning and have taken Alice in her arms gave him immense satisfaction. He had been almost afraid that aunt and niece would be left in an alien country. Of course there was

his mother. But he shared the feeling of his sisters in regard to her. Whatever she might say or do you were never quite sure of the dear old mummy. You never quite knew when you had her, what she was up to, or what she would be at next. She always gave you a feeling that she was playing a little game of her own, and that you were not allowed to know precisely what it was.

"You could not have come at a better time Del," he said to his young sister in his old frank way. "I am going away to-morrow; and I want you to look after my little girl a bit. Promise me you will, little kid. You see she might get rather lonely if nobody comes to see her while I am away."

Delia made the promise. It was impossible to refuse. Even as she made it she knew it to be an act of disloyalty to her father, and that wild horses would not drag her sisters to that cottage door. But the child was powerless. As heretofore, she was completely the slave of Billy. And his young wife was very sweet and beautiful.

When she heard that her brother was going to leave England the next day for no purpose other than to seek money, in spite of all her newly-acquired self-control the tears welled up.

"Oh!" she said, with a pang of indescribable over-mastering bitterness.

The delicate-looking wife had hers under a better command. Not a tear escaped her, but it seemed to Delia that in her eyes was something worse. The dumb desolation in them was to haunt her for many a day.

"Oh Billy! How can you go away from her? How can you leave her? If she were mine I am sure I could not. I should want her to stay with me always and always."

"Don't talk like that, little kid." In all her recollection of him she never remembered to have heard that tone. "You musn't talk like that, you know."

"I feel I must," said Delia, with valiant simplicity. "Oh how can you, Billy!"

"Drop it little kid!" It was almost as if her simple words had struck him. "I hardly know how I can myself. But when you've got to do a thing you've jolly well got to do it, whether you can or you can't."

By an effort which afflicted his sister as soon as she detected it, he suddenly re-assumed his laughing, careless ease.

"You young beggar. What do you mean by catechising me like this? What do you mean by it, eh? I shall have to box your jolly young ears, you know, if you get so coxey. But we are getting quite a woman now, aren't we? *We* shall be falling in love next."

Billy was no observer, therefore the swift change his light words provoked in the face of his young sister passed without a challenge.

"Why, hang it all!" cried Billy, in the stress of sudden recollection, "you haven't spoken to Auntie yet."

With his cheery laugh he brought the old woman forward from her hiding-place in the background of the wall. Although it was to be supposed that Delia would hardly have scared a butterfly, Miss Sparrow was very much afraid of her, and when dragged out of her obscurity her nervousness scarcely permitted her to speak a word, although she was able to drop a curtesy the like of which Delia had never seen before.

Delia found herself regarding the shrinking face so pale and unhappy and debased with privation, with the same wonder and irresolution as she had regarded Alice. And in spite of their great disparity in years, she became as suddenly the prey of that impulse which had caused her to enfold the frail child to her bosom. In the case of this old woman she awoke to find that she had done the same thing.

"Will you tell my mother and the girls that I am going back to town to-night?" said Billy, as Delia prepared to take her leave with the empty basket in her hand. "Tell them to come up here this afternoon. I should like to see them before I go; there is no saying when we shall meet again. And I had better say good-bye to you, little kid, here now. I always knew you were a good little sort. Not much of you, eh? but what there is, is solid gold, eh, little Miss Muffet? And now for the very bestest kiss you have got. What a cold face you have got, little kid. And not so rosy as it was, by Jove. You must buck up, little kid. Mustn't sit so hard at those books, eh? One

more for luck ; and then off with you—Lord knows when we shall see one another again ! "

He gripped Delia's hands in his own, and looked upon her with all the beguiling fondness of his eyes.

With his last kiss upon her lips Delia hastened from him into the open air. The fear was upon her that she would break down before his beautiful fragile wife, who was so brave. She ran into the sensuous air of May heavy and languorous with the sun, and the almost intolerable music of birds ; and never dared to stay her headlong flight until the wood and the hill and the little cottage nestling under them were far away.

There was a pitiful commotion in the child, but the dread of tears was past. They would have been a relief now, but the power to shed them had gone from her. A cruel rigour had fastened on her throat ; her brain was resolved into a compact and definite substance in her skull. It was like a ball of fire. And yet its matter was so heavy that it was like a piece of clay. She even made an effort to cry now for the sake of relief ; but the attempt to do so was like inducing the blood of her veins to distil itself through the glands of her eyes. Something of the *hysterica passio* had come upon her.

She went straight to her mother with the empty basket and the tragedy of her face, and gave Billy's message. The barrier of awe and distrust of her mother fell down an instant in the pitch of desperation while she said—

" He is going away from England to-morrow. He is going to leave his wife ; and it is because of his father. He did not tell me so, but I know it is—oh ! I know it is."

Mrs. Broke regarded her youngest daughter with a perfectly serene expression. She scanned the horror and the sorrow rendered so poignantly in the child's face ; she listened with an extraordinary patience to her wildness, and replied to it at a carefully-deliberated leisure with the impartial melancholy of a judge pronouncing sentence.

" Yes, Delia, it is because of his father. It must be a lesson to you all."

As she spoke these words, her blue eyes were seen to dilate in a blaze of meaning, something in the manner of

that fabulous jewel which turned the hearts of all who looked upon its lustre into a block of stone. But by now the child was in no condition to heed, and the analogy between her brother's case and her own, which her mother intended to strike home, had not the power to pierce her.

"It is cruel, it is unjust!" she cried, transfigured by her grief. "Alice is so sweet and beautiful and good! It is cruel, it is wicked to make her suffer! And Billy is so brave and noble! It is wicked, it is unjust!"

Her mother regarded this outburst with a tinge of curiosity not unmingled with astonishment. Delia was positively the last creature in the world in whom such an ebullition was to be looked for. It made an unwelcome precedent in the history of her daughters' lives that one of them should appear before her thus. And this child too, the one among them with the least initiative, the least force of character, to appear before her in this state.

"Delia, I must ask you to be silent."

"Billy has resigned his commission," the child went on, with a dreary wildness. "He is giving up everything; he is leaving his wife. He is——"

"Delia, you can go."

The child could not escape the dominating glance, and the old terror of that implacable will re-asserted itself. It strangled the quick words on her lips. With a little cry of horror she ran from the room.

CHAPTER XXVIII

Pariah in the name of Love

IT was not until the afternoon that Delia was able to find her five sisters. They had taken luncheon at an agricultural show. Ultimately she found them assembled in full conclave over the tea-cups in their common room, talking cattle and horses. As soon as she entered she cried—

"Billy is at the cottage, and he wants to see you all to say good-bye. He is going to leave England to-morrow."

The first glances her sisters directed to her were of the nature of bewilderment: her voice was so wild, her words so unsteady. It was Joan who was the first to recover her self-possession; or, overcome perhaps by so momentous a crisis, they did not, after their kind, trust themselves to have thoughts of their own until she, the one having authority, their natural leader, had indicated the direction in which they must go.

Even Joan was seen to shiver a little, but her mouth was very stern, and her face reminded them irresistibly of their father's at the moment he had issued his mandate.

"You must leave this room, Delia, until we have taken tea. We cannot submit to disobedience from you."

"Mother sent me," said Delia defiantly.

"You know that father had forbidden us to mention his name."

"In his presence," said Delia wildly.

"We should act when he is absent just as though he were present. If you have not enough self-respect to do that, we cannot have you here. Leave us, Delia."

"I will speak first; I must speak first! Billy goes away from England to-morrow. He asks to see you, and

if you do not go to him now, you may never see him again."

Joan rose, put down her cup, opened the door, and stood beside it.

"Delia," she said in a low voice, "I insist on your leaving this room; and you are not to enter it again until I give you permission."

Delia withdrew. She went up to her bedroom, but soon the confinement of four walls became intolerable. The feeling was upon her that the world was pressing her to death. She must have a freer, more spacious place in which to breathe, in which to think. Therefore, bareheaded as she was, she went downstairs and out of doors into the exquisite freshness and peace of the evening. Bareheaded, she crossed the lawn into the meadows beyond cooling slowly from the heat of noon, their green faces already dipt in dew. Cattle lowed from the streams, hedge-crickets made their little noises, birds formed their evening notes; there was the sound of a thousand insects; and over and above the mild voices of nature the peace of a hundred thousand years.

To the child in her unquietness this eternal serenity was touched with healing. The great peace of God was like an opiate; but not even the majestic calm of a sunset falling on green fields could wholly assuage the tumultuous sorrow that had overborne her. Grief had rendered her mute, but it needed all her power to prevent it from welling up into frenzy. Not once, but many times, had she to conquer the desire to fling her burning face into the long swathes of meadow grass clad icily with dew.

What had her brother done, and the tender child he loved, that all the world, including those who formerly had adored him, should treat him as a leper? What taint lurked in the sacred nature of their love, that they should be punished thus? She framed the question to herself—Was it a crime, the violation of some secret arbitrary law, that one human being should love another?

There was the example of her own case. She, in the desire of her spirit, had dared to love, and how bitterly, how relentlessly had the act been visited upon her! Now was she condemned to a perpetual hungering torment that nothing could appease, a perpetual deprecation of self that

nothing could mitigate. And even could she, like her brother, have brought her cravings to their consummation, she saw the price at which it would have been obtained. His fate would have been hers. The scorn, the reproaches of those whom she held dear would have fallen with the same heaviness upon her.

A little wistfully she remembered the bravery and the strength of this beloved brother. What a great heart he had in adversity! Why was she incapable of that undaunted fortitude? Ah! but then the requital of love was his. He had the exquisite co-operation and stimulus of passion to bear him onwards, the entrancing sense of two made one and walking in the perfect way. Well might he hold up his head and splendidly endure! She, pitiful, insignificant as she was, had not the force to evoke the immortal welding flame in the nature of another. She could never be fortified with the supreme exaltation of completeness. Her pangs had no resources to assuage them, no sanctified bread on which to grow appeased. Her love must be fed, must be kept alive wholly upon the blood of her own spirit. This love of hers was a monster that waxed upon the precious fluid of her veins, and with its inordinate demands starved her young nature into shadow and paleness.

Her wandering feet strayed far across the fields in the direction in which the cottage lay. The moment she awoke to its nearness she turned and went back. Intensely she longed to look upon that beloved brother again; intensely she longed to derive an instant's sustenance from one final pressure of those arms. But she did not dare. Only a miracle had saved her from humiliation in their parting of that morning. It would shatter her to look upon him again. They were a pair of outcasts. The hands of those they revered, the hands that had nurtured them, were uplifted against them now. They were pariah in the name of love.

Thus she turned from the cottage, and, in utter self-abandonment, bent her steps the other way. Chance took her in the direction of that ruin, from whose crazy heights she had been plucked by the arms of one when the jaws of death yearned to take her in.

Hour after hour since that April afternoon had she put this question to herself: Why, if she had no existence for him; why, if she was no more to him than a stone, or a bit of earth, or a chip of a tree—why had he risked, wantonly, his so-precious life for hers? Surely he, whose life was developed with such a marvellous rarity, would have had too high a sense of the duty of custodianship of a thing so exquisite imposed upon him, to endanger it for a whim. And yet how much more merciful it would have been to let her fall stark upon the earth and perish. Could he but have known to what he was condemning her, he would surely have allowed her to die.

Perhaps it was not chance, after all, that was leading her to that hallowed but intolerable scene. Or chance may be only a name for a subtle concatenation of agencies all working in secret to one end. She was going to the ruin in an instinctive, involuntary manner; and yet who shall say she was not aware of what she did? The dizzy heights that rose there gauntly in the dusk were the only objects to which life now attached a meaning. They filled her eyes, and through the mists of the evening beckoned her to go and receive the consolation they alone could bestow. And in the weary spirit there was a yearning, vague, irrational, almost too impalpable to be expressed. It was a desire to lay her throbbing temples on cold stone. There may have been a suggestion of the eternal quietness, of the ultimate elixir for every living thing when it lays down the burden at last that long ago has grown too heavy to carry, in those impassive upright walls covered with ivy and peace and years, on which poor old Time himself is allowed to rest like one who is tired. And again, were they not too inexpressibly the sepulchre of the unfulfilled? They were the cloisters of recollection. When we feel we can look forward no more, our eyes turn inward to confront the spectres of our hopes. When the future, the fairer, the more radiant part of us becomes a tomb, the only beatitude that is left to us is in the limbo of the never-was.

The sun had vanished; the wonderful evening of the early summer was rapidly deepening to dusk. The dew had come upon the fields: it hung before her as she walked a pale faint curtain, enfolding hedge and pasture, or a cold

white pall. A far-off star or two had lit their candles in the sky. The little chili moon was come already into heaven. The distant winds of night were already to be heard walking in the valleys like unquiet spirits. There was hardly an ember of daylight left when she climbed up the familiar hill into the shadow of the ruin. The deep reflection that it cast rendered it all but invisible; while too much was she wounded with intolerable memories to discern a vague mass, a something dark outlined in mirk against a wall of ivy.

In her obsession she approached within a few yards of it, and, bareheaded as she was, pressed her aching hair against the ruin. The first touch of the cold stone brought relief. The tears burst out of her heart. In the first ecstasy of feeling them flow once again she surrendered herself to a strange orgy of passion, and craved that she might weep to death. Presently her sense of oblivion was invaded by a voice at her side. It was as though experience was repeating itself. It was as if some pregnant incident of an existence in some far-off æon, too remote for the senses to accept, was seeking for recognition. It was too distant even to have significance. To Delia the voice at her side was the faint voice of a phantom floating among the winds of the glebe.

" Alas! alas! " said the voice.

By now there was some eerie quality in it that seemed to arrest the motions of her heart. She peered round wildly, and was able to discern the dim, yet luminous, outlines of a face she had never looked to see again. She uttered a cry like a little hunted animal. The next instant she was encompassed strongly, with the tip of her nose, the firm line of her lips, and the point of her chin all huddled together against something breathing and responsive.

She was content to close her eyes and lie there captive. Her heart had resumed its motions, but now it pattered quick and little, like a bird's when, after being driven hard about a greenhouse, it is taken and imprisoned in the grasp. Only, in the wild flutterings of her spirit there was no desire for escape. She had no wish other than never to emerge from the arms that kept her. She craved to close

her eyes in the ecstasy of feeling them about her, never to open them again.

Minutes passed without speech.

"Alas! alas!" the voice repeated.

She still hung in his arms, heeding nothing.

"Alas, poor wild little bird!" he said, sensible of the motions of her heart as it beat through her print dress.

He pressed his lips against her wet cold hair.

"You have no hat. Oh! why have you come like this, and in such a season? You are overborne, you poor wild bird beaten against stone by stress of weather. Or, no, your pulses flutter like those of a small lamb that has been driven till it dies."

The child still clung to him with all her strength, fearing, in some desperate manner, that when she released him he would go.

"You went away," she said; "you left me, and I—I felt I could not live."

"But I come back to you now."

"You will not go from me again?"

"Never, never!"

"But why, oh why! did you not tell me you were coming back? Why did you go without giving me a word—just one small little word, that I might live? I thought you had gone from me for always. I thought you had gone from me, and that you would never come back. Oh! I could not bear it! If you are to leave me again, promise that you will cast me from that height above us before you go."

"You have suffered," he said, with grave pity; "yet I acted as well as I knew."

"Why, oh why did you leave me so?"

"I did not know myself. I had to put myself to the test; I had to be worthy of you. But oh, my poor little bird, how you have suffered!"

"Why did you not give me just one small little word? Only one—one to keep me from despair."

"Do not upbraid me."

Her lips were yielded to his.

"I have been wrong," he said, settling her upon his breast. "You make me begin to see that I did not know

you, even as I did not know myself. But I must tell you my story, in the hope that it may help you to forgive."

Delia strained to him closer, and tucked the point of her chin deeper into his coat.

"Almost from the first day of our coming together I saw how careful I must be; and when I saw you yield more and more as the weeks went on I grew afraid. I did not know myself. You see I am speaking out all that is in my mind, for there can be no secret between us now."

She dug her chin deeper.

"At first, you see, you had no real meaning for me. You were the first specimen of womanhood of a rare variety I had seen; and I suppose I was Professor Dryasdust looking at your wonderful mysterious mechanism under a double magnifying glass. At least, that was how I felt at first. You were an intensely interesting pathognomical specimen, but you did not fill my nights and days. But then, after a while, this apathetic mind began to concede you something else."

Half swooning on his coat, she knitted her arms to him so tightly that she felt they were like to crush him to death. She almost longed for the power. It was as though having a rare jewel miraculously delivered to her after it had been given up for lost, she yearned to embody it as a piece of her own actual self.

"After that I began to see you as you were, and presently preferred to come to you rather than stay at home to do the work that kept my heart at peace. If I did not see you, I got to feel that I had passed a day without living. Your presence began to mean more and more. I began to carry away the sound of your voice in my ears, your pretty little childish accents. They grew like music; such music that one day, as I was reading "Lycidas," they pronounced the magic numbers word by word. That put me in fear, my little one. And I remember that one calm midnight, writing in my attic on white foolscap, the page became a transparency by which I could look through the films of mysterious darkness which kept your eyes. There and then I threw the pen down, and for a whole week knew not how to take it up again. But with all this I felt you were going faster and farther than could I. It had begun to

dawn upon me that you had the greater nature, or, at least, a greater one in love. You see, we wretched people have only about a fifth part of a soul to call our own, a poor gift, alas! to bestow upon a very woman who has brought to us the whole of hers. Art is the inexorable, jealous mistress that we serve. Far too great a tyrant is she to let us render an adequate service to a mistress of our native species, endowed with flesh and blood and delicious human caprices. She will brook no rival near her haughty arrogant celestial throne.

"That was the reason why by now I was afraid. I knew that art had me in her bonds. Hence the need for vigilance. Beyond everything I saw how essential it was that you should not be misled. Even a chance word might wreak an injury. I must be wary to protect you; for you see, I was still underrating Nature and overrating Art. How could you, a child, hope to overthrow the most mighty, the most ruthless, the most passionate tyrant who ever placed her yoke on the neck of man? How in the end could such a little thing as you hope to prevail against her?

"Therefore, when I went to London I was sorely beset. My heart had become the battle-ground of two terrible powers in the strange inner world. Nature, the Mighty Mother, had already made her call upon me; but with Art, the Mighty Mistress, looming in the background, I felt I dare not lift a finger in response. If ever you read the biographies of such as me, you will understand what I mean, my poor little fairy; there are very few of us who are not guilty of a crime when we dare to marry. And so I deemed the only honest course was to leave you without a hint of the bloody conflict in my spirit. It would have been too grievous if, after I had bidden you have faith, my flaccid fibres in the absorption of the exotic life they are condemned to lead had allowed Art to spurn Nature after all. I think, had that happened after I had once surrendered to you, I could never have regained my self-respect.

"That, however, is far behind us now. Once in London, I awoke to the trite fact that in the end Nature *must* conquer. Whatever I had been to you at the time of my going away, within one short month you

had become that to me, and more. You had entered into absolute possession. The scheme of things no longer had a significance apart from you. Day and night, I was dominated by you; you were in my dreams, you were in my work. You were recalled to me in a thousand shapes that made your absence mock me. There were a hundred meanings in your face that held me up to scorn; the lights in your eyes grew more unfathomable and mysterious; the carriage of your little head, the patter of your little feet, the sound of your voice haunted me—oh, my little fairy, I cannot tell you how they haunted me!

"And so at last I awoke to find myself your equal. I had passed through the ordeal of absence, and instead of becoming less to me you had become more, a thousand times more. I knew where I was; at last I was empowered to act. Thus when I left London this morning to spend a few days with my father at Cuttisham, I resolved that I would seek you and make my confession. But I did not look to find you here. I cannot tell what mysterious agent it is that brought you, because in the letter I sent to you this morning I did not mention time or place. Above all, I made no reference to this ruin; indeed, it was not until half an hour ago that I thought of coming here. Then, observing whither my walk had unconsciously led, I turned to look upon a scene that will be ever hallowed by strange memories."

"It is a mysterious Providence," cried Delia. "Let us kneel here on this bank of earth and ask God to continue to keep us in His care."

"We are strong enough to make our own destiny," said her companion in the arrogance of his power. He gripped her so tightly that she could have cried out in a very gladness of pain.

But the return of a perfect sanity to the child was bringing in its train a reaction of great fear. She began to shiver in the arms of her lover.

"Ah, you do not know, you do not know!" she said mournfully.

"Are we not of the mettle that grips the giant Difficulty by the throat?" he vaunted. "You would hardly believe how many times I have thrown him to the ground"

"I have seen you do it once," she said with the exaltation of his tone stirring in her pulses. "I have seen you do it when no other in all the world could do it."

"It can be done again."

"I am thinking of my father. You do not know my father."

The voice of the child was like a wail.

"The name of that giant is Convention. Together, in our might, I think we can do battle with him too."

She clung to his coat convulsively.

"You do not fear, my little one?"

"In the heart of me there is a wretched cowardice."

"And I beside you?"

"You cannot know what my father is. Men like you cannot understand."

"Will the ogre kill me and eat me for his supper?"

The child shuddered and nestled into his coat once more.

"We will put on our invisible coat and our shoes of swiftness, and borrow the sword Excalibur, or get friend Merlin to steal it for us. Be of good courage, my little fairy princess. I can fight any giant in the world in any enchanted castle, in any impenetrable fastness, with any fiery dragons before the mouth of it, or I were unworthy to hold you in my arms. Grip tighter, little princess, and fear not."

"If only I had courage!" said poor Delia.

She was still shivering at the recollection of her brother's fate.

"You shall not fear while you lie against my heart. I would there were a light by which you could see my face. It would be a very talisman to bear you through those noisome gloomy caverns—Doubt and Difficulty. It never yet turned back from the work before it. Nor ever shall, poor little fairy, nor ever shall!"

By virtue of these arrogant speeches her cheeks began suddenly to glow. She saw him as he swooned upon the bank of earth with the blood flowing from his wounded hands. Such heroic words as these were his splendid birthright. In another they were boastfulness, but in him, the valiant warrior, they were proper to his quality.

"I do not fear; I am not afraid," she cried.

"You were not mine, poor little fairy, were it otherwise."

"Must you, must you see my father?"

"Yes, indeed. I must beard that ogre and carry my good sword in my hand."

"You will find him truly terrible!"

She was trembling painfully.

"How cold you are! And your poor heart is beating so. Come, small princess, you shall not be afraid."

"Ah, but he is so terrible!

"And we? Are we not terrible also?"

She closed her eyes again, and lay back shuddering and buried her head in his bosom. He imprinted another kiss with extreme delicacy upon her wet cold hair. He then put off his tone of romantic lightness for one a little more matter-of-fact, as became one in whose veins the Saxon was mingled with the Celt.

"And now," he said, "suppose we are material? That is a point of view that must never be absent from the mind of the honest Briton. I think we can safely say that the world has not ear-marked us to come together. Still, if the happy chance that called us into being also predestined us for one another, perhaps for once the world will be put to shame. Accidents of birth and fortune have no lien upon our immortal souls. I am afraid even poor Mr. Debrett will not be able to do more than write a letter to the *Standard*. Now I shall be able to build a small doll's-house of a palace for you, my little fairy princess, if your aristocratic spirit can stoop to the region of South Kensington. You see I get eight hundred pounds a year from the *Review*; I am to enjoy a subsidy from the University of Cambridge, which may mean a little more; and publishers have already deigned to take such a friendly interest in me because of the little book I presented to an astonished world a month ago, that I think I can add still a little more from that direction too. Therefore, still continuing to degrade ourselves with the material, there should be enough to provide for the little princess who lives in the doll's-house curds and whey and an occasional bunch of flowers newly from the country, which I am led to understand is all that fairy princesses choose to live upon. And now, my little one, the evening is late. I

can feel your hands are ice ; you have no hat and coat ; you are very thinly clad."

At the mention of the hour Delia leapt up in horror.

" Oh ! what is the time ? I had quite forgotten it. And I have not been home to dinner. I shall be scolded dreadfully."

He struck a match and read his watch.

" Five minutes to eleven."

" I must fly."

" Alas, poor Cinderella ! "

Long ago it had become wholly dark. They picked their path through the bracken on the steep hillside, and underneath the shyest, faintest shred of moon made their way across the dew-soaked meadows to the near neighbourhood of the house. A clock from an adjacent hamlet chimed the hour of eleven: Delia's heart sank as it counted the relentless strokes.

" Oh ! whatever will happen ? " she cried as she stood a moment in despair.

" There is no longer a place for fear in us. Should we walk now into the ogre's parlour hand in hand ? "

"Oh, no, no, no ! To-night I am sure I could not bear what would follow. I think you will never be able to understand what my father is, and my mother also, and my sisters worst of all ! "

" You are right," he said ; and his calmness seemed to add density to her despair. " We must be wise and choose the hour."

" It makes me unhappy to hear you speak so lightly. When the full weight of their unkindness falls upon you, I almost seem to fear that you will renounce me."

" You shall not have such a thought. From this night, come what may, doubt cannot invade us. Never, never shall there arise a cloud between us now."

" You are greater than I," said Delia, peering up into his face by the aid of the insufficient light of the moon, while her eyes glowed and dilated until they were far superior to the paltry pair of stars that hung about heaven, " always greater than I. Even in love you are greater, and yet my love drove me to the verge of despair. Who am I that should have such as you for a lover ? God is too

gentle with me ; He rewards me out of all proportion to my desert."

"You will never doubt again, poor little falterer ?"

"Never, never while I live !"

"And I have never doubted nor will. Good-bye, small fairy. A kiss and then good-night—here by this noble tree on this fair spot of earth. To-morrow or the next day I will beard the ogre in his lair ; but come what may : come shine, come hail, we pledge ourselves for ever !"

"For ever !"

She was locked to him one wild instant more.

They parted underneath the young moon, and went their ways. Delia was bareheaded and thinly clad. The damp of the night had penetrated her stockings and shoes, and her petticoats were a sop where their edges had swept the dew from the fields of meadow-grass through which they had trailed. The clock from the village steeple struck the half-hour after eleven ; she had had no food since the middle of the day, and that very scanty ; she had been exposed to the open for many hours, but she was neither cold nor hungry, nor thirsty, nor afflicted with weariness. She was not even heavy of heart. There was an exotic exaltation in her spirit that for the present placed her beyond the reach of all calamities of the flesh.

When at last the dark form of her lover had been swallowed in the gloom of an immense wall of trees and lost to view, Delia turned to go indoors. She might have had fear in her heart, as hunger, and in her limbs weariness, and other infirmities of a corporeal character residing somewhere in her flesh. But in nowise was she sensible of these things. There was that magical secret in her that had resolved her young blood into ether, so that she seemed no longer to have feet of clay rooted in the mire of the world.

CHAPTER XXIX

Two Women

TO Delia's relief she discovered the great hall door to be ajar. So late was the hour for such an early retiring household that she was afraid she would have to arouse it if she were to be admitted.

The fact that the hall door was undone was a phenomenon, and very properly of a piece with the transcending events of that evening. But looking a little farther she found the explanation of it, even as we may find the explanation of all phenomena if only we look far enough. The old butler trod softly forward from out of the dark interior in a pair of carpet slippers with a candle in his hand. He placed a finger to his lips.

"Be very quiet, miss. They all thought you were in your bedroom at dinner. They thought you were unwell. They have not found you out. And they won't if you go up very quietly."

"You are very good to me, Porson. How did you know I was out?"

"I had an instinct, miss. I saw you were not at the dinner-table; I always carry you all in my eye, you know. And I learned from Walters you were not in your room. You will find a fire there, and a plate of bread and cold meat and a basin of warm milk. If I may take the liberty of saying it, miss, I have noticed you have not been well for some little time."

"You are too good to me, dear Porson. How did you find out that?"

"Perhaps I know more about all of you, miss, than you do yourselves. If you will forgive the liberty, I don't think if you were my own daughters you could be more to me than you are. You see, miss, I have known your father all his life. I can remember quite well the day he was born. Man and boy I have been in this house sixty-two years come Christmas. Now if you go very quiet, especially past your mother's door, no one will know of this. Even Mrs. Smith doesn't know."

The august old gentleman lighted her to her bedroom by bearing the candle cautiously and solemnly before her.

It was true that at the dinner-table her absence had excited no comment, after Joan had hazarded the remark that she might be unwell. Mrs. Broke, who was late for the meal herself, as, unknown to her husband and daughters, she had been to the cottage to say farewell to her son, was hardly in a state of mind to exert her customary vigilance. Besides she also, by the light of what had transpired at her strange interview with the child that morning, thought she might be indisposed. Broke himself, who of late had become the most apathetic of men, hardly spoke a word throughout the meal, and betrayed an interest in nothing beyond the strip of tablecloth immediately before him.

Delia, therefore, was spared the ordeal which she dreaded. She drank the basin of warm milk gratefully, and slipped into bed, and then, for the first time for full many an unhappy night, she slept the sleep of perfect youth, of perfect health, and of perfect weariness. It was deep, dreamless, reconstructing.

She awoke with a clear heart to the twitterings of birds about her window, as in the unintrospective days of old. She sprang from her bed refreshed in mind and body. There was a little carol upon her lips. The night of darkness and despair was past. She had awakened to a fresh and joyous day. Her spirit was no longer racked by doubt. She was beloved.

In the sanity, the clearness, the calm of morning, fear

could exist no more. An exquisite self-reliance thrilled within her. There was no room for baser doubts now that the crowning one of all had been for ever laid at rest. The little world in which she had been reared, the little world which a few short months ago had been so dear, so sacred to her, might now conspire to spit its venom at her and hers, but nothing, as it seemed in the splendour of this sovereign day, could poison the clear fountain from whence sprang their common faith. No human obloquy could percolate to their impregnable love.

She had awakened to find herself in the toils of a supreme exultation. For the first time she tasted the pleasure that has its source in the requital of love. The passion in its craving, in its insatiable madness of desire, is a fever; but the consummation of it, the sanctity of faith answering to faith, may be compared to a strange beatitude serenely rising like an aerial vapour above the hissing cauldron of chaos. Delia dressed blithely. Singing, she sallied out to feed her pets. Presently she returned to procure a crust of bread to gnaw herself, for she had suddenly made the discovery that she was desperately hungry.

It was hardly more than five o'clock. The cold and pure airs of the morning that swept her temples now recalled vaguely to her mind the feverish longing that had possessed her the previous evening to lay her burning forehead on cold stone. But the transactions of that insane period had become little more than a dream already. She was far too reasonable now to be able to look back upon them with any sense of detail. Clothed in our right minds we cannot enter intimately into the high delirium of fever and unreason.

She sang to herself softly as she tripped over the wet lawns, and she did not fear. Fate and her world should put their heads together and contrive their worst, but the necessary resolution was now hers to stand steadfast. She was like her brother now. Yesterday her complaint had been that her love had its foundations in the sand. But now, like his, it was raised upon the imperishable rock. Yesterday she felt that she could never be as resolute as he. Now she had awakened to learn that

she had misjudged the forces of her heart. This morning she felt her strength to be as great as that of any creature in the world.

Her happy way led her down a remote path, in which was a small summer-hutch without a door. Coming upon it suddenly she was transfixed by an apparition seated in it shrouded in grey light. It was Maud Wayling, bare-headed and clad in a dress of white muslin. She was reading a book. She lifted her wonderful grey eyes to Delia, and smiled wanly.

"Come and sit by me," she said, "and take my hand and speak to me. Are we not both wayfarers in the same dark valley? Are we not both stricken of the same mortal complaint?"

Delia was no longer timid. Ever since Maud Wayling had been among them in that house she, in common with her sisters, had been in fear of her; but this morning that feeling and the self-conscious reserve induced by it had passed away. Without hesitation she approached. The vivid pallor of Miss Wayling's face afflicted her. It was peculiarly cold and placid; as transparent as marble; and the rings that had lately come about her eyes were the only tints upon it that had any value as colour. As Delia came to her now, her own experience enabled her only too clearly to understand the true nature of her malady. The proud and unapproachable creature was suddenly represented in a new light.

"You loved him; you loved Billy; and he has gone from you," cried Delia. "I know what it is to bear that, because I have had to bear it too."

"There is no hope for women like us," said Maud Wayling. "When we are bereft we can only wither. I say this to you because we both suffer the same inexpressibly bitter degradation. There is no rest for us, no peace; we can only perish. Our mouths are stopped with dust and ashes, but they cannot always stifle the words that surge upon our lips. It only remains for us to hide our heads."

"Yesterday I felt so," said Delia, and she could not wholly repress the thrill of exaltation in her voice strive as she might to do so out of pity for the wretchedness

of this other sufferer. "But I am not so now. It has pleased God to have mercy upon me; I am very happy now. But perhaps I ought not to tell you this; it may give you pain. Perhaps I am cruel and unkind. I have no right to speak of happiness when you are so unhappy. Please forgive me; but this morning I feel it is impossible to conceal from any one the terrible joy that is making me so happy."

"I am glad to see you happy. I have measured your affliction by my own, although I dared not speak to you about it."

"And yours, and yours! It has been base of me not to see what your affliction was. Oh, but I see now! Every inch of these dark ways have we walked together. I have not been alone in my despair. And yet so lately as last evening it nearly overcame me. I have not known how to pass my days. There has been no solace anywhere. At least, poor Maud, if others do not mourn for you, I shall always. I do not know why my happiness has been restored to me in tenfold measure when you, who are so much wiser, so much better, so much more beautiful, have had your happiness taken from you, never to be given back. It does not seem just."

"I am trying to acquire the habit of not complaining of Fate," said the beautiful unhappy woman; "but the task is heavy. It calls for more tenacity of purpose, a greater strength of nature than I possess. As you say, it does not seem just. But I think I am coming slowly to see in what way I have offended. There is surely a reason for a punishment so unmitigated. I am coming slowly to see that it is because I have surrendered myself to a heartless and selfish mode of life. My interests have been too much centred in myself. My thoughts have run too much upon my private ease; they have poisoned my very spirit, sapped my resolution. My inhuman selfishness has cloyed the springs of my heart. It has no recoil. This is why I am punished."

"But why should not I be punished too?" said Delia. "It does not seem just that I should be condemned to suffer only for a term when you must suffer always. I am sure my crime has not been less than yours; at least

no one could have thought more about oneself than I have lately."

"Yes; but your nature is wholesomer, honester, purer, stronger, than is mine. It has not been subjected, and has not fallen a prey to the temptations of money. You do not know what a curse money is. You can scarcely be made to understand what a crop of foul diseases it breeds. The idle can never be happy; the creatures of surfeit can never rejoice. And for one like me to be bred in the manner that I have been, and not to languish, not to swoon on the cushions of prosperity, seems to be impossible."

"Is there not a cure?"

"I seem to fear that my nature is not great enough to effect a cure. But I am sure that if I do not soon find something to lessen the pressure of my thoughts I shall not be able to bear my affliction. It is more than we nurselings of wealth can endure to be thwarted in our smallest desires, let alone in our greatest. We cannot escape from ourselves. The monotony, the heart-wearing wretchedness of being ever face to face with our own imperious desires has no alleviation. I begin to envy the lives of the women in the London shops. They have not forgotten the taste of happiness. When they can snatch an instant from the battle of existence to give to themselves, they enjoy a truer luxury than we creatures of surfeit have ever known. Think of the child at the cottage whom your brother has married. She has known more of happiness in her squalid little life than have I in all my acclaimed and fêted one. The very simplicity of nature that is in her is an alluring thing; whereas the stagnating, foetid complexity of an extreme civilisation that is in me is a rank offence that smells to Heaven. I suppose my unhealthy life, reacting on my weak nature, has made me what they call an egoist—an unhappy victim of the god of Self."

The beautiful unhappy woman covered her face with her hands.

Delia, in spite of the ecstasy of her own situation, was filled with pain by such a distress. In regarding it she beheld a state of mind from which she had miraculously

escaped. This austere, this aloof creature, who was so fair, was being seared by a suffering that too intimately she understood. Human nature, it seemed, was much the same all the world over. One of her complete humility was privileged to share the pangs of the proudest bosom.

CHAPTER XXX

In the Maëlstrom

WHEN Delia came in to breakfast her mother looked at her with a keenness that was disconcerting. She did not speak, but to the child her glance seemed pregnant with meaning. The recollection suddenly swept over her that her lover had posted a letter to her the previous day, and that as yet it had not come into her hands. A pang sank into her. It was born of the conviction that it had been intercepted.

From that moment a steady reaction came upon her. The buoyant fearlessness of the early morning began slowly to decline. The habit of reflection reasserted itself in her, and it brought foreboding in its train. What would happen when her lover came to see her father? She hardly dared to frame the sinister question. Her mother, in the earliest days of his appearance in that house, had shown herself capable of making cruel speeches to his face, and behind his back of even more cruel references. As for her father, him to whom all her life her instincts had led her to look as her natural protector and friend, after his harsh dealing with the brother beloved by them all, who should say in what manner he would be moved to deal with her!

The consequences that might ensue upon her lover's coming to that house grew intolerable to consider. The condition of intense restlessness the subject induced led her to seek a preoccupation. In this suspense of the impending, silence and solitude grew too ominous to support. She must do something, go somewhere. Accordingly she went to the cottage to see her brother's young wife.

Had she not promised Billy to go and see her frequently? There was the consciousness that by so doing she was fulfilling a duty that had been imposed upon her; besides, she had to confess that there was a longing within her to acquire the first-hand experiences of those in the vortex of this passion of love.

At the cottage, although the sun still bathed the clean walls, and in the wood behind the birds still piped their spring notes, the spirit that yesterday presided there had gone away. All things were unchanged, yet the presiding genius was not there. To-day they were flat and tame, and palled upon the heart, where yesterday they were quick and significant and filled with a memorable fragrance. At the moment Delia entered the trim and spotless kitchen she was afflicted with this sense of loss. The absence of a laughing voice, a frank presence, a pair of tormenting impudent arms haunted her. It seemed to pollute the light of the sun and render all things grey. And her own feeling of bereavement was reflected poignantly in the face of the old woman and the young.

Alice came to greet her with a hungry eagerness, and a faint cry upon her slightly parted lips. She had already learned to overcome her timidity in regard to Delia. She was Billy's sister; and her love for him was a complement to, not a rival of, her own. But this morning the young wife was wan with terror.

"I have ruined him," she said in a hard voice, without emotion.

Delia received her tenderly in her arms.

"No, oh, no!" she found the courage to say. "A love like yours could never do that."

"It is because of me he is driven away," said the young wife. "I was wicked and unheeding, and thought only of myself, or I should have known that so it must be. It was not possible for me to be the fit companion of my husband. I ought to have recognized that, and have saved him from the ruin he could not foresee."

"It is not ruin," said Delia. "He will return to you soon, rich and full of love. His love for you will be more, if it were possible for it to be more, and he will no longer be dependent on others."

"There is something in my heart that tells me he will not return. I have been base and wicked, and God will know how to punish me. I have thought only of myself. I did not think of those who were near and dear to him; of you and your sisters, of the beautiful lady who loved him, of the mother who has been so good to me, and the poor father I have made so unhappy. It has been wanton of me. In the gratification of my own wishes I had no thought of the misery I might bring upon others who were very close to him; others very full of love for him; others who were so much better, so much nobler than myself. I do not know how any of you can forgive me; I do not deserve to be forgiven. God will not."

The hard tones of her despair were as so many blows delivered on Delia's breast. The words of consolation welling out of it were ruthlessly forced back.

"When your brother gave me his love," the young wife went on, "my thoughts were of him and of myself and of what we were to one another. And when he asked me to be his wife, although I was so much frightened, I could only see the bearing it would have on my own life, and on my aunt's. I saw no farther then. I could not see his mother and father, and his sisters in the background all as full of sorrow as I was full of joy. Poverty and toil made me very cruel and self-seeking. I have ruined him who loved me, because I would not deny myself his love. But God will punish me."

The fragile creature quivered like a leaf in the wind.

"He will come back soon," said the valiant Delia, applying the comfort of one child to another. "He will come back very rich, and my father and mother and sisters will be so happy that they will be very grateful to you."

"He will never come back," said the young wife. "I have been so wicked that God will never allow him to return. I shall not be allowed another moment of happiness. I have had my hour, and it was more than I deserved!"

"You have not been wicked," said Delia. "Only heartless and cruel and unworthy people could say that. Love is not wickedness. It is all nobility and purity; and if we are

punished because we love worthily and righteously, those who punish us are unjust."

A prophetic fire broke forth so suddenly from the lips of Billy's sister, that the youthful wife recoiled from her, and looked wonderingly into her vivid eyes. The brooding blue depths she beheld were the haunts of mysteries that her own brief but highly wrought experience dimly enabled her to apprehend.

"Those were my thoughts but a few weeks ago," said Alice, "but I was blind then and could not see. Believe me, dear Miss Broke, such a blindness is wrong and wicked. If we purchase this love that is so pure and noble at the price of the happiness of others surely our selfishness cannot be forgiven. My love for your brother and my poverty caused me to be blind and callous. I could not see the truth, and did not wish. I was beloved, and I asked no more. But now the scales are taken from my eyes by the God who knew all the time what I was doing, and hated me for my wickedness. Yes, Miss Broke, He knew what I was doing. And now He has taken away the happiness I gained so wrongfully, and because of that He will never give it back. He knows I am unworthy."

The hard poignancy that underlay the soft accents seemed to bruise Delia. Her mother, in the first interview with the old aunt, had had an experience much the same.

No words of consolation, however tenderly and valiantly conveyed, could avail against the conviction of Alice that an offended deity was dealing in person with her affairs. And worse, such were the clear eyes that anguish had given her, she could trace in the eager attempts made by the sister of her husband to bring her comfort something of the source from which they sprang. Delia's passionate speeches of consolation could hardly arise from a purely impersonal desire to mitigate the pain she suffered. Her hot words leaped forth too palpably under the goad of a fierce impulse. Such flaming cheeks, such flashing animation of her limpid eyes, such hectic utterance could hardly be aroused by a wholly disinterested seeking after the welfare of her brother's wife, dearly as she might be known to love him. Alice, by the light of her experience, could

too truly read the cause. Her wise eyes saw that Delia was scorched already by the sacred flame.

"Forgive me, dear Miss Broke, but I pray you, I beseech you to take heed of that which has fallen upon me. Do not act in wantonness as I have done, lest an injury you do to others be avenged upon you."

Delia turned cold. A feeling of nausea was overspreading her.

"But, oh, Alice, how can we injure others if our love is pure and worthy?"

The young wife pressed her palms tightly together and closed her eyes like one in the act of suffering an unendurable pain.

"Ah, dear Miss Broke, those were my words only a month ago!"

"I will repeat them, I will repeat them," said Delia wildly, seizing the hands of Alice.

"The thought is too hard for us to bear," said Alice. "We dare not think that a love like ours should injure others. But it does, Miss Broke, and as surely as it does will God avenge it in us."

"Oh, I will not, I cannot believe it!"

"Have I not ruined your brother?"

"No," said Delia fiercely, "it is not true. It was my father that banished my brother from you, not your perfect love."

"Has he not always been a kind and generous father? If it were not that there was clear cause of offence in me, surely so just a man would not have turned against him. It is because he knows I am base and unworthy. And that is what I am, else never in the selfishness of my heart would I have taken away from him I loved more than it were possible for the love I bore him to repay."

Against such a desolation nothing could avail. All predictions that Delia made of her brother's speedy and prosperous return were as the droppings of water upon stone. Nothing could change that arid despair. Delia could not endure to stay and witness it. A grief that lay too deep for tears, that nothing could make less, or for which a term could be defined, so oppressed the beholder that she became as one with it. Thoughts of the position

in which she herself stood at that moment were induced. Promising to return the next day and the next, and for full many a one to come, as though in such a childlike willingness to heal some measure of surcease might reside, Delia left the cottage faint of spirit and cold of heart.

New doubts rose up like mountains in her so impressionable mind. In the face of a grief so barren love itself lost something of its radiant significance. Could it, after all, be an act of guilt to cast one's thoughts in a direction that those in authority over one had forbidden them to go? By the light of that morning's intercourse her own case was picked out with hideous plainness. It was surely parallel and counterpart. There were those who were near and dear it behoved her to consider. There were the father and the mother and the sisters who would be stricken by her conduct. Was not the distraught Alice right? Did she not speak with the prophetic instinct born of a terrible experience? The pain inflicted upon others could not be justified by a corresponding gratification bestowed upon oneself. The duty she owed to the friends who had nurtured her was very great. She must yield her lover. Oh God, she must yield him to the prejudices of those who held her dear!

The thought was too inexpressible to contemplate. She walked faster down the hill to the green fields, faster and faster she walked to the birds and the insects and the sweet-breathing earth. She must outstrip that thought, outpace it, run from it, lose it wholly and for ever in the mazes of the over-grown hedgerows tangled with nettles and briars. It must never find her again. Kind God in heaven, it must never find her again!

It is not given to the strongest of us, however, to bar out thought by the door of mere resolution. The cruel suggestion, the intolerable suggestion, continued again and again to recur. No matter whether she walked or ran it was a spectre gliding noiselessly by her side. If such an anguish as that of the young wife at the cottage was the consummation of a passion so pure, so perfect in itself, so all-sufficing, must there not be some subtle, some ineradicable taint residing there unrevealed to those who

harboured it, else she who slaked her so great thirst at the immortal spring could never awake to discover that the draught had poisoned her sweet blood.

Could it be that her duty to her friends was more sacred than that to her lover and her own nature? Inquiries of this kind are not likely to have much authority with passion, but to inexperience striving to go right they may present themselves in the reaction from that first strange ravishment of the spirit. The self-accusing misery of her brother's wife haunted Delia as a premonition of her own doom. She and her love would soon stand before the world in precisely that guise. Must a similar tyrannical Providence intervene to blast their lives if their unlicensed inclination dared to set the world at nought?

That afternoon was to be dedicated to a garden party at a great house in the neighbourhood. The six daughters of the house of Broke put on their best white summer-afternoon frocks, which for several years past had done duty on state occasions, and set out in the ramshackle omnibus with their mamma. Dark forebodings clouded the heart of Delia even as she went. In it there was a reasonable presumption amounting to certainty that her lover would appear before her father during her absence. High tension is apt to breed a strain of fatalism in the best-balanced of us; surely was it not in the nature of things that her lover should come to her father's house when there would be no friendly presence to protect him? Within the last few days she had conceived a genuine horror of her father. In the reaction from a lifetime passed in blind adoration of him, he stood out now in her imagination a very ogre in his treatment of the tender and the helpless. Intensely she could have wished to be at home when her knight came to confront the giant in his lair. A sight of her might strengthen him still more, although his courage was the noblest thing she had ever known. The sense that she was near him might do something to soften the nature of the ordeal. She might break a rebuff, or avert high words arising between them. For she was possessed with a fear that the untoward must ensue. They both had implacable natures. She knew that if they once set up their wills one against the

other, like a pair of mastiffs they might go for one another's throats, and contend for the ascendency until one or both lay dying on the floor. That was the clay in which they were fashioned. In her chivalrous childish heart she yearned to buckle on the armour or to bear the spear of the so gallant knight who was to contend for their joint cause before the dragon. If only he had not to go alone! If only she could be at his elbow to cheer him on his way! If only it could be her fortune to intercept any chance buffet hurled at the sacred form of him who dared everything for her!

So luridly was the image of impending calamity before her eyes that she almost allowed herself to plead a headache as an excuse to avoid the garden party. By the time the afternoon came round there was a conviction in her that there would arise during the next few hours a crying need for her presence in that house. To such an extent was she worked on by this idea that tentatively she complained to her mother of being unwell, and expressed a preference for staying at home. Her mother, however, was emphatic in her insistence that she should accompany the rest. And to Delia, in the throes of her prepossession, the vigorous nature of that insistence allied to the fact that her mother had already suppressed her lover's letter, and had studiously avoided any reference to his name, gave colour to her fears.

CHAPTER XXXI

In which our Hero takes down his Battle-Axe

THERE are times when a man may feel himself to be the victim of a conspiracy on the part of Destiny. Circumstance treads on the heels of circumstance, misfortune succeeds misfortune, horror accumulates on the head of horror, until the most trivial incidents are invested by a tragic shape, and the commonest accidents of life become part of the design against us.

Broke sat in his library that afternoon re-reading for the tenth time a letter that lately had come into his hands. It was not addressed to him in the first place, but that was not a fact to lessen its significance in his eyes. At the outset it has to be confessed that to a man of sober brain, whose life was a fabric of dull and reasonable events, there was hardly a line in it which could be construed into offence. But Broke's mind no longer moved upon the patient path of sanity. It ran ahead of itself and climbed perilous altitudes to view the motives of others. Awful shapes were residing in his fancy. Other persons, in their commonest dealings with him, were sinisterly clad. A grim suspicion enhanced the tritest facts. He had ceased to tolerate; in peace he could neither live nor let live. There was a conspiracy against him; there was an anarchist ready to cast a bomb inside every cloak that fluttered.

The world had laid a plot to pull down to its own ignoble level the sovereign thing he called his pride. North, south, east, and west it was springing its base emissaries on him with that object in view. Now they tripped him up, now threw dust into his eyes, now stabbed him in the back, now hit him in the face. The bloody rogues were driving

him mad. He would have to show them that he could strike out as well as they. Only it would not be done from behind in his case. There would be no springing out of corners and curtains with him, no stalking on tip-toe to get in a blow when the victim was off his guard. If he struck, the miscreant should have fair warning of what was in store, and the blow should be straight in the teeth. Indeed, so far gone was our hero that even at this moment he was prepared to take up arms.

He could bear his indignities no more. First was he smitten with a bitter poverty, a fell disease loathed as much as small-pox or black plague by every right-thinking Christian Englishman. Was it not a blackguard act on the part of Destiny! Then, upon the pretext of curing that distemper, a crew of wretched persons, hired ruffians of the baser sort in the service of the arch-schemer, who in the times of his prosperity would never have gained admittance to his threshold, offered him gibes and insults in the guise of patent medicines. Then his son, his most cherished possession, for whom he had made great sacrifices, was seduced into the plot against him. The wretched fellow had been entrapped without knowing that such a thing as a plot was in existence. Then again, his wife, whom these thirty years he had trusted implicitly, seemed to be in danger of falling a victim to these diabolical agencies. Had not she, foolish, deluded woman, already offered insults to his intelligence by attempting to defend the indefensible, and by claiming forgiveness for offences that were unpardonable? Was it not a coward's trick that in this pass to which they had brought him they should alienate his natural ally, and by their tricks and base hypnotic devices rob him of the sympathies of the one person in the world to whom he might look for whole-hearted allegiance?

And now, finally, as if these things were not enough to undermine the sane spirit of a man and cause its overthrow, they had arranged, these blackguard conspirators in their cloaks and their sombreros, to strike a blow at him through the medium of one of his daughters. A man and a father may bear up his head in the midst of much. He may, for example, support with the expenditure of a few groans the

black ingratitude of an only son. But a daughter is too tender, too sacred. The infidelity of such a one, as in the case of Lear, goes straight to the heart of him, and strikes him down. One of the veiled emblems round whom he had swathed the Yashmak of an overweening pride, that the gross eyes of the world should not sully them with so much as a glance, had been corrupted too, and was become an instrument for his humiliation.

The letter he had in his hand had been placed there by his wife. It was addressed to his youngest daughter, presumably with the child's connivance. It bore the signature of a Cuttisham bookseller. Such incidents were of almost daily occurrence now. They were part of the scheme. The indignities that had been recently put upon him were incredible; he began to marvel at his own patience. But they were telling upon him. These malicious machinations of an Unknown Hand were doing a work, although not the one perhaps they had in view. Every time he was baited his fibres stiffened, his nature grew more implacable. He would prove the mettle that was in him; he fancied that his endurance would not be the first to give out.

Still that trite proverb is ours that those whom the gods would destroy they first deprive of reason. Broke began to feel that they were seeking to pluck reason out of him by the hand of humiliation. They were not content with his son, they must take his daughter. The patronage of Salmon was not enough; he must suffer the equality of Breffit. Really, the whole business was becoming too extravagant. It would have been farce, of a somewhat dubious quality certainly, if the pinch of his circumstances had not for ever banished mirth from his lips. He felt that laughter was demanded of him; in his former state he must have laughed cheerfully and heartily; but a ruined man loses the knack.

It was while our first or principal comedian was surrendered to all manner of these reflections, that the butler entered to say that a Mr. Porter wished to see him.

"Bring him here."

Mr. Porter was brought there immediately. He came in with a slight air of self-possession, a part of his natural

simplicity or part of his obtuseness, whichever construction the beholder preferred to place upon it. Instinctively Broke noticed it against him as part of his effrontery. He neither offered the young man the privilege of shaking his hand nor did he invite him to accept a seat.

Our hero waited with a grim and rather grey face, somewhat the colour of cold ashes, for the visitor to state his errand. He waited with a certain curiosity as to what mode he would adopt. To aid him by speaking a word would be to rob the thing of some of its scientific interest. Therefore our hero stood looking at him steadily with a slightly unnatural calm. A man entirely devoid of emotion does not usually hold his hands pressed to his sides, while the veins stand out in knots and bunches on his forehead. And all the time the Olympian audience sitting in heaven, those earnest followers of time-honoured and legitimate farce, had their necks craned upon this born comedian, not missing a syllable that fell from his mouth nor a single facial gesture. Indeed, they doted on the situation itself, and on the perfectly natural developments it might be expected to produce. Even the God of Irony himself, that perfectly blasé old dramatist, might have been seen to throw himself back contentedly in his fauteuil in the author's box, with a simper of satisfaction for his own work. If his leading comic man, who was working so famously, proved equal to this scene which had been specially written for him, the thing was bound to be a success. There are worse things than being an author when the stalls are craning eagerly towards a choice moment in a little thing of your own, which is being played so beautifully by your friend the manager and his gifted company.

"I don't suppose, Mr. Broke, you know why I am here," his visitor began in the clear-cut tone of perfect self-possession. "I hope you will not find my explanation tedious. One there must be, I fear, but I hope you will be patient with me."

Our hero cut him short. Now that the fellow was speaking it was more than flesh and blood could endure to stand there and listen.

"Are you the writer of that letter?"

The open document he held in his hand he gave to his visitor.

"I am; although I would like to say it was not intended for any eyes save those to whom it was addressed."

"No need to tell me that," said our hero with a sour smile. "Perhaps—ah—you will have the goodness to—ah—tell me what you mean by it."

"I am here for that purpose, sir. The facts are these——"

"Stop!" said our hero. "I will not trouble you. If you—ah—want to explain your effrontery I may say at once that—ah—nothing you may—ah—say will explain it in the least."

"Effrontery?" said the young man with a demure smile. "I must ask you to forgive me, Mr. Broke, if I do not view my conduct in that somewhat arbitrary light. I have the sanction of your daughter; the sanction of myself; and I am not entirely without means. I do hope you will be a little patient, sir, and allow me to make a statement of the case."

"The case calls for no statement. An apology may not be out of place, although it is—ah—my duty to warn you beforehand that I am not at all likely to accept it."

The young man recorded a certain bewilderment in the quick play of his features.

"Apology?" he said. "I do not quite understand. Forgive me, sir, if I do not quite see the necessity for an apology. Indeed, I confess that in this connexion the word strikes me as singular."

The impatience of the first comedian was manifest.

"An ample and unreserved apology can be—ah—the only excuse for bringing you here to-day. I—ah—decline to hear any defence of your conduct."

"I cannot allow, sir, that my conduct has been of a kind to call for a defence."

A sudden grip came into the young man's voice; there was a round of pleased hand-claps in the Olympian Theatre.

"I—ah—decline to discuss it in any form. It is indefensible."

Our hero delivered the line with admirable point. But the powerful efforts he was putting forward to retain a hold upon himself were only partially successful. His face grew tawnier, and his voice shook.

The younger man also was forfeiting something of his former serenity. By an earnest self-mastery he had acquired the habit of tolerance. But his nature was otherwise. Men of his type are only too morbidly susceptible. He was already beginning to feel that Mr. Broke must not trespass too far. There were limits. Beyond them one's duty to one's self entered into the question. Delia's father was becoming intolerably arrogant and overbearing in his manner.

"I hope, sir," he said, forcing himself to be calm, "you will let me speak of this matter. I may say at once it involves your daughter's happiness."

"Stop!" our hero commanded him. "You have no right, no authority, to mention my daughter. It is—ah—gross impertinence, sir, on your part. I—ah—shall feel obliged if you will please understand that our interview is at an end."

Crackles of laughter and salvoes of applause ran round the Olympian Theatre at this brilliant sally by the first comedian.

His visitor gave back a step; there was not a trace of colour in his face.

"Mr. Broke," he said, "even allowing for the fact that the relations we have stood in hitherto have been those of employer and employed, it does not seem to me that this is the tone one man is privileged to use to another."

"Do you propose to teach me manners, sir?"

His grim sneer drew a cheer of approval from the stalls.

"No; I only ask for common courtesy."

Our hero recognized a cant phrase of the fellow's kind. His gorge rose at it. Persons such as these insulted one grossly in one's tenderest, most vulnerable point, and then, by way of justification, they put in a plea for common courtesy. Did they think that these low tricks were going to be played off on him? At the sound of the cant phrase the mediaeval devil that all this time had been snugly coiled up in his heart, suddenly rattled its chain to infer that it was ready when wanted. Upon his honour, if the insolent young cad did not take himself off at once, it would hardly be fair to hold him guilty of the consequences!

"I advise you to go," he said hoarsely.

His facial play was much admired by the diverted audience in heaven.

His visitor remained immovable and erect, with a rather fine-drawn smile on his white face. His lips were tight, but his eyes were stretched wide to their full limits. A challenge glittered in them. It was cold and hard, of the lustre of steel.

Our hero's blood was up; and when it was in that interesting condition he was the last man in the world to have consideration for others. Besides, in *Etiquette for the Elect*, the invaluable little manual of behaviour by which he regulated his life and conduct, it laid it down in the form of a rough maxim that the persons who in the first place were entitled to his consideration were surprisingly few. A Cuttisham bookseller, for example, was not included in that category.

They continued to confront each other unflinchingly. Broke had indicated the necessity for Porter's withdrawal. He was not in the habit of repeating his phrases. In silence he waited for him to comply. But his visitor did not move a step.

It was conceded at this point by the critics among the Distinguished Audience that although it was not to be expected of a junior that he should play with the finish and aplomb of the first comedian, who was perhaps the chief of his enchanting profession, the young one was doing very well for a beginner.

"I am here to speak," he said, "and speak, sir, I must. It is of the first importance. The opportunity cannot recur."

Broke raised his chin warningly. Porter still betrayed no disposition to quit his ground. And to the obstinate nothing is more intolerable than the exhibition of that quality in another. Our hero was confronted by the sudden limit to his patience. It yawned a very precipice under his feet. The small devil in his heart was wriggling ferociously to slip its gaunt little neck out of its collar. Its chain had rattled unceasingly for five minutes past.

"I speak with the sanction of your daughter," said the young man.

"You lie," said our hero, trembling with fury. "How

dare you—ah—ah—affront me to my face? If you do not get out now—at once, I shall—ah—ah—be under the—ah—ah—necessity of kicking you out. You cad!"

Applause was breaking in inconsequent hand-claps from the cheaper parts of the Olympian Theatre, and was being hushed down by the stalls. The first comedian was surpassing himself, and the true devotees, scenting an incursion of legitimate drama, were determined not to miss a word.

Porter heard dully. His senses were numbed and faint, but in his head the blood was cool. Not a line relaxed in his tense bearing. In him had been aroused the desperate tenacity, the concentrated determination that was the keystone of his nature. He did not move an inch, but, livid as he was, he met the unbridled eyes of our hero with a contemplative gaze, which slowly acquired a tinge of pity.

When your confirmed hereditary despot encounters a frank and rather condescending challenge to the unlicensed will which is his sovereign law, there is only one course open, only one means left to him by which he can vindicate it. Our hero took down his battle-axe.

"My God!" he cried, "you defy me in my own house, you—you counter-jumper. You've had a fair warning. You won't take it? Suppose you take this!"

"This" consisted of a heavy blow with his clenched fist full on the mouth of his visitor. He followed it up with a tremendous clinch. In an instant he had got one hand as tight as a vice on the lean throat, and while the weaker man, half-stunned and shattered to pieces by the blow, made semi-conscious and ineffectual wriggles like a dying rat, Broke hustled and dragged him to the door of the room. Without much difficulty he got him over the threshold into the hall, but, arrived there, his task became rather more laborious.

They could not have been more unequally matched. Broke was a full-blooded son of the soil, lusty of thew, close knit, with a great arching chest; in form a splendid animal, and rejoicing like one in a life of activity and hardihood in the open air.

Porter, on the other hand, was of the type that is bred in towns. He seemed to present an appearance of arrested development and general physical incompetence. He was small-boned, short-limbed, muscleless and puny; his whole frame was under-sized, and there was a suggestion about him of anæmia. But as soon as he found himself hustled into the hall, and he was able to gain, by the aid of that sense which had not already been knocked out of him, a clearer conception of what had befallen him, and what was likely further to befall him, his ineffectual rat-like wrigglings, hitherto merely instinctive, became endowed with purpose. His puny hands rose in the air, and the fingers of them clawed about at large like the tentacles of an octopus, until they found a grip on Broke. His thin legs writhed and coiled themselves around the solid oak-like calves of his adversary. He entered into a struggle to free his neck from the grasp of iron that was choking out his life, and in the effort his collar and the band of his shirt came away together, and allowed him something of freedom.

It was a rather ludicrous scene that was enacted in the hall in the view of Lord Bosket, who had that moment entered it, and also in that of one or two astonished persons of the establishment. Not a word passed between the combatants. Their silence was ominous. The only sound that issued from their strife was the continuous scuffling of their feet as they slid upon the highly polished floor, while now and then a grunt was wrung out of their tense machinery.

The younger and weaker man had not a chance, and the highest evidence to be adduced of his resolution was that he was able to prolong the uncompromising course of his exit. He was prepared to yield his life rather than submit to be run out at that distant door, but the blood in his arteries was as water, and his unaccustomed muscles seemed to crumble like bread. His struggles might be superhuman, but they were of no more avail against the contained fury that encompassed him than is the falling earth against the energy of Cyclops. Their clenched forms swayed this way and that, but their progress was ever in one direction.

The process was sinister in its quietude, its complete freedom from audible sound. In the anguish of contest their eyeballs might be breaking from their sockets, but it was a fact that passed unheeded in the silence and the fury with which they grappled to one another. The nearer Broke got his man to the door, the more powerful grew his victim's efforts to disengage his fists from the embrace that rendered them impotent. If his very life snapped in the act he felt he must get one blow home, that it might vindicate him in some kind. There was the fury in him of the savage beast. The trained intellect was less than nothing to him now. Reason, veneered over with the civilized arts, forgot to exercise its functions. The primeval fiend that lurks in the hearts of all of us, and has lurked there from the time that man first swung upon branches and curled his tail round a tree, the lust of hitting back, possessed him; overthrew the kid glove precepts of the civilization by which he was encompassed; rendered him hopelessly drunken, hopelessly mad. The scholar, the recluse, the philosopher, the maker of maxims for the guidance of his less disciplined brethren, the burner of the midnight oil, the scorner of pleasure, the liver of laborious days was become a wild beast.

This spirit of the incarnate fiend in him, however, was of no avail. Escape from the concentrated grip that was crushing him to powder, body and soul, he could not. He was almost demented, and snapping with his red teeth like a dog by the time he approached the threshold of the hall door; but no matter what he did he could not avoid the crowning ignominy that awaited him. He would be spurned out of doors with a kick like a bag of shavings. The blow in the face that had knocked down the citadel of his intelligence, that slow work of years, as easily and completely as a house of cards, must be swallowed, must be submitted to. It had changed his blood into fire, but the Deviser of his clay had ruthlessly withheld from him the strength, the common physical strength, to requite his foe for that indignity. As he swayed that moment close-knit to his adversary towards the farther door, life itself would have been but a little price at which to buy the satisfaction of feeling his raw knuckles beating out

the teeth of this murderous monster in the guise of a man who had beaten out his.

He had spent his life in the conquest of the flesh. He had supposed he had achieved something of philosophy. He was not a participator, an actor in the human drama. It was his place to sit in the stalls, in the manner of those Olympians who now witnessed his present performances, and look on at life with critical, searching, but impartial eyes. Was he not a seer, an inquirer? Did he not believe that the hope of man, the solution, the vindication of this amazing ironical chimera, for which we have so many names, lay by the arduous road of knowledge? But here, in this crisis, at which we and the gods who planned his destiny observe him, he would have given the Old Testament and the New, Homer and Shakespeare, Plato and Sophocles, to possess the gross physical force to beat his enemy to earth, and, lying prone, to have ground his heel into his face.

Nature may have her compensations, but her exactions can be incredibly bitter. Has she not a habit of choosing the pound of flesh we can least afford to dispense with, or worse, of levying a distress for it at the season when it is least convenient for us to meet a demand that ought never to be made? The sedentary life of the cabinet, girt about by those fair and wonderful things which the rude defilements of the world have not the power to sully, is an exquisite thing, but it precludes physical efficiency. The unstable limbs, the peering eyes the flaccid muscles, the weak nerves are the price that is extorted. It is not given to the recluse to become the man of action. He was called on now to pay for that inner paradise of the spirit in which his existence had been passed, with a most ignoble bitterness. At the last a snarl of rage was wrung out of him to find himselt inept. It was the snarl of a ferocious cur as, with tongue protruding, it rolls over to die. He was mad and drunk and blind by now. The groaning engines of his heart vibrated until he could not breathe. He nuzzled to his enemy, and tried to tear him with his teeth, since his feeble hands could not help him. His inarticulate fury was distilled through his throat in little sobs, but nothing

could save him. The stronger man had both hands now upon his neck. He shook him like a rat. He shook him until his bones seemed to rattle against his nerves, and his eyes and tongue protruded. Afterwards he cast him from him. He spurned him in contained fury out of doors, bleeding, to the earth.

Our hero then turned his back upon the figure sprawling on the gravel outside his residence. His dilated face was confronted by those of the excited servants and Lord Bosket; and as with chest hugely heaving and jowl inflamed he took from his pocket his bandana handkerchief and gravely mopped away the signs of his discomposure, a perfect roar of applause greeted him in the Olympian Theatre, though he heard it not, and the God of Irony in the author's box, allowing his grim visage to relax, grinned upon him in grateful admiration. The behaviour of his leading comic man in this scene had made the play. He feared nothing now; success was assured; and impervious in that contentment, he permitted two of his friends to link their arms in his and lead him out of the box to celebrate his good fortune in a bottle of Perrier Jouet '87 at the refreshment bar adjoining.

"My God! Edmund, you've about done for the feller."

Our hero, having mopped a face and neck on which the veins were still swollen a good deal, his habitual heavy-footed serenity seemed to be restored to him. At least he greeted his brother-in-law with excellent composure.

"Hullo, Charles, how do? Porson, you had better help the fellow to get up, and—ah—see to it that he goes about his business."

Lord Bosket, however, was inclined to see a more sinister side to the affair.

"He don't move," he said. "We had better go and give him a leg up. I don't know who he is or what he's done, but I call him sand. Took his gruel well. He's only a featherweight, but he was game right up to the finish. I like to see that. Give me the feller or the hoss that don't know when he's beat. It struck me, Edmund, that you were a bit severe, considerin' he is not more than eight stone nothing. He is not in your class, you know,

at all. You are fifteen, if you are a pound. What's he been doin'? Poachin'? Poisonin' foxes?"

While Lord Bosket was making these remarks and putting forward these inquiries, the butler, a footman. his lordship's coachman who had driven the dogcart that had carried him thither, a gardener or two, and several odd men from the stables, formed a group round the man lying motionless with his face staining the gravel. White-cheeked housemaids peered out of the upper windows. Broke, however, heedless as to the fate of his victim, had betaken himself back to the library.

Lord Bosket now came bustling through the group, and seeing that the form they surrounded was apparently insensible, and that blood was issuing out of it, he knelt down on the gravel with an air of professional assurance bred of experience in many glove fights. He addressed the unconscious man, and tried to raise him in his arms. Not being able to do so, he looked up at the onlookers in an agitated manner, and said—

"We want a doctor. Somebody go and get a doctor, can't you? I don't like it at all."

CHAPTER XXXII

Rencounter between a Dogcart and an Omnibus

THEY picked up the young man and propped his head against a corner of the stone balustrade that ran at right angles to the door. The appearance he made was so unfortunate that Lord Bosket became more agitated than he was before.

"Get a doctor, can't you, somebody? Of course there's not one about. They are the same as the police—never there when you want 'em."

There was no need to loosen the young man's collar, because in the struggle it had been torn free. Water was sent for; but before that primitive remedy had arrived, to the immense relief of Lord Bosket and that of the bystanders, consciousness showed signs of returning. Presently Porter opened his eyes. In addition to the distressing condition of his mouth, blood was flowing freely from a deep cut in the forehead upon which he had pitched in his exit. He certainly made a sorry figure with the blood dripping rapidly into his eyes, and smearing the vivid pallor of his cheeks.

The first thing of which he was conscious was that he was being enveloped in something warm and wet. The innate repugnance to blood to be found in men of his type was so strong that he nearly became insensible again. It was only when he awoke to the fact that he was the centre of a group, and that anxious and startled faces were directed upon him, that he showed signs of regaining self-control. In the shock of this second dis-

covery he stumbled to his feet. In the act, however, he nearly fell, and Lord Bosket took it on himself to support him.

"It is no use, my lad," said Delia's uncle, taking hold of him. "You'll have to have that head and mouth seen to, and thank God it's no worse. Get him a chair somebody, can't you? and get him a drop o' brandy. Sit down there my lad; and don't try standin' until we've fixed you up a bit. As damned nasty a cut as ever I saw. Sit down, my lad, and I'll tie this handkerchief round it temporarily; and then I'll drive you into Cuttisham and let a vet put a few stitches in it for you. Of course there isn't one in this God-forsaken hole!"

The sufferer, however, did not show a disposition to accept services of any one. Several times he made ineffectual efforts to escape from the group, and several times assured them feebly that "he was all right."

"Yes, my lad, you look all right, you do. But this will put the fear of the Lord into you, what?"

The awe-inspiring agent in question proved to be brandy, which had now arrived, and Lord Bosket measured it out with paternal gravity, and, with a firmness that was quite unusual, insisted on his drinking it. He then drank the remainder himself with a far greater aplomb than the patient had exhibited, announcing to the onlookers, as he did so, that "these things always upset him."

Nature was having her turn now with Porter. Fortunately, Lord Bosket's tone was so solicitous, and his concern so evident, that in the end the shaken and demoralized man surrendered to him entirely. In any case, he knew it was not in his power to make an effectual protest.

Our friend having bandaged personally the deep cut near the temple with several large handkerchiefs and the moderate skill at his command, called to his man to bring the dogcart forward. While this vehicle was forthcoming he took out his pocket-book and selected from it two crisp pieces of paper.

"Here's a tenner, my boy. That'll help to put your head all right, eh? I respect you."

As the young man was in no condition to accept this

specific for a broken mouth and a lacerated forehead, our friend crushed them into one of the pockets of his coat. The cart having now been drawn up in a convenient manner, he said—

"Hold him up while I get in. Then give him a hand, and mind how you do it. The poor devil's not quite himself. Anybody know who he is? I shall look well drivin' a poacher or a feller of that kidney into Cuttisham, I shall, but I expect that's about the ticket. Never mind, Edmund should not be so rough. Besides, I don't care who the feller is, or what he is, he's grit."

At this point the butler moved forward to his lordship with an air of great mystery.

"It is the young man, my lord, who used to come to teach Miss Delia," he said in a diplomatic undertone.

"Didn't know there was a young man who used to come to teach Miss Delia."

"Oh, yes, my lord. Her ladyship used to send a young college gentleman to teach her Greek and Latin."

"Nonsense, Porson. This can't be the feller."

"I beg your lordship's pardon, but it is impossible for me to be mistaken."

"Nonsense, my boy. Mr. Broke would not be such a damned fool."

The august old gentleman pressed closer to his lordship's ear to impart an even more pregnant item of information.

"What—what!" cried Delia's uncle, trying to baffle his own credulity.

He gave vent to his astonishment by straddling his legs apart, thrusting his hands deep into the pockets of his breeches, looking steadily down his nose, and pursing his lips. He occupied this attitude for the best part of a minute before he recorded his bewilderment in his favourite formula.

"Well, I'm damned."

The immediate business in hand having then recurred to him, he jumped into the dogcart and superintended the entrance into that high and awkward vehicle of the still only half-sensible Porter. As he took the reins he called out to his man—

"I shan't be back here, to-day, Thompson. Borrow a mount and ride home."

The dogcart started briskly on its way. It had not left the park gates of Covenden far behind when an old and familiar vehicle hove in sight. It was the ramshackle omnibus returning from the garden-party. A sly but inveterately humorous leer appeared in the face of Lord Bosket when this equipage waddled into the middle distance. He touched up his horse, and determined to waste no time in getting past it. But the interior of the quaint chariot was furnished with seven pairs of feminine eyes. Therefore his chance of escaping notice was about as remote as it could be.

"Why, it is Uncle Charles!" exclaimed the occupants excitedly one to another. "And, oh, there has been an accident! There is a man with him who is bleeding and smothered in bandages."

Delia was next but one to the door. In a moment she was up and clutching at the handle. But quick as she was her mother was quicker. She rose in almost the same instant and caught her by the wrist.

"Sit down, child," she said quietly.

Delia swayed a moment irresolute with the lumbering motions of the vehicle. She looked at her mother with something rather remarkable in her face.

"Sit down, child."

The tone was even quieter than before.

Delia obeyed. By this the dogcart had passed out of sight.

CHAPTER XXXIII

Tribulations of a middle-aged Peer at the Hands of Woman

BY the time Delia reached home things had resumed their normal shape. Visible evidences there were none to testify to the occurrence of the extraordinary. In the demoralized condition of her mind she was almost impelled to make secret inquiries of the servants; but reflection showed her the impossibility of this course. Indeed it was a solace to think that this might be a matter of which they had no cognisance. But whether they had or not, and whatever the agonizing curiosity that was devouring her, she could not admit them to her confidence on such a subject.

By evening she was persuaded—such was the ominous silence that was maintained — that she must await the next visit of her Uncle Charles. Never a week went by without his putting in an appearance at Covenden if he happened to be at home. Whatever it cost her to withstand those pangs that seemed to be biting her heart into pieces, he was the only person she could consult legitimately. She might take the extreme course of putting a question point blank to her father, but he would hardly be likely to answer it; and if he did answer it in the terms she foresaw he must, would not a grave, a terrible ordeal be presented to them both? Her curiosity had mounted to a passion, it was gnawing her to death; but with a young girl delicacy is inveterate.

The bleeding man covered with bandages she had seen in the dogcart had confirmed her darkest forebodings.

Also of late she had come to know the almost awful ferocity of her father's nature when the savage in him was aroused. In her heart she felt it was not necessary to inquire what had taken place in the interval between her lover's coming to that house and his going from it. But the case was too grave for circumstantial evidence. She was as sure as that there was a God in heaven that her father was guilty; but there was a sheer physical repugnance in her to convict until the positive evidence of his crime was laid before her eyes. Natural reverence for her father, which, when all was said, was still paramount in her, demanded that he should be given the benefit of every doubt. That is not the way of her sex as a rule. Instinct prompting, it will take inordinately short cuts to the most inaccessible of conclusions. But in the case of her father, so long as no eyewitness could be brought forward who was prepared to attest to what had taken place, she must not dare to judge him. And let it be urged that this unfeminine forbearance on the part of his youngest daughter was one of the amplest compliments the character of our hero ever received.

Nearly a week went by before Lord Bosket came to Covenden again.

During that period his unhappy young niece hardly laid her head on her pillow. Neither day nor night could bring ease to her thoughts. Nothing could appease the morbid curiosity that corrupted her heart. As the days passed she felt she must hear the truth or she must die. There was no source open to her from which to acquire information. It was not impossible to write to her lover. In these black days she hardly dared to think of him. Her first wish was to shut that bleeding bandaged image of him out of her mind. It was a hideous nightmare to which her imagination must not revert.

In the meantime the inquiries she could not bring herself to prosecute had probably been made by others. For at least, dating from that tragic afternoon, life among her sisters would have been intolerable had she not been possessed by one all-dominating thought. She suffered a completer ostracism than ever. They neither spoke to her, nor looked

at her; they shut the door of their common-room against her; they avoided her sedulously at meals. She was wholly debarred their pastimes and intercourse; and so thorough-going they could be when they chose, that like the name of their brother, that of their youngest sister was banished from their lips. Their behaviour was formulated on the admirable principle that they had not an existence at all. If they met Delia descending the stairs as they were ascending them they refrained from looking at her.

Her mother remained the same as usual. Her perpetual smile had as little meaning as ever, and her epigrammatic silences as much. In her daily demeanour, a miracle indeed of candour and suavity, there was not the twitching of an eyelid to suggest that there had been an incident. It was just as if their relations had remained exactly as they had been always. She might have been quite unversed in the art of suppressing letters; and intellectually incapable of reading the expression on the face of her daughter when she held her by the wrist to prevent her from jumping from the omnibus.

The manner of her father was not much more eloquent. Maybe he was grimmer than of yore, and sufficed more to himself. His great laugh was hardly ever heard now from the head of the table; something seemed to be lacking in the old spirit of camaraderie between himself and his girls. His frank delight in them was hardly so articulate; the same boyish admiration did not beacon out of his eyes when he referred to them in the presence of others; he no longer seemed, to Delia at least, all tenderness and all simplicity. To her remorseless eyes it was as though he sat with a wolf gnawing at his vitals. The greyness of his hair had become much more palpable of late; his cheeks were not so ruddy, and had lines in them where they hung loose and flabby; he was ageing rapidly. Nor did he carry his massive head quite as of yore. It had lost a little of its military trimness. His daughters were wont to regale their imaginations by tracing a slightly imperial hauteur in him. They could not have done it now. Everything about him was become creased and relaxed, where formerly it was so alert, so finely braced, so

full of self-esteem. Delia would have been shocked by this change in her father, wrought in a few weeks, had it now been possible for her to be shocked by anything.

At last the morning came when the child could entertain the hope of setting all doubts at rest. Her Uncle Charles waddled in among them just as they were finishing breakfast. His comings and goings were as casual as anything could be. He was there at all times and seasons, the first thing in the morning, the last thing at night, so that in the process of time a bedroom had become dedicated to his service, where the sheets were kept always aired for cases of emergency. He held a latch-key of the hall-door of Covenden against those occasions when he had no desire "to go home and face the music"; and it was no infrequent thing for his feet to be heard stumbling up the stairs of his brother-in-law's residence in the small hours of the morning.

"Top o' the mornin'," he said, as he took a seat at the table in their midst, and summoned the assiduous Porson by the simple expedient of holding up a finger.

"You can get me a mornin' prayer, Porson."

As Porson retired on this ecclesiastical mission he was peremptorily recalled.

"Did I say a devilled kidney as well, Porson?"

"No, my lord."

"Well, I meant to. A mornin' prayer and a devilled kidney."

Porson had proceeded but a little farther on his pious errand when he was recalled even more peremptorily.

"I'll have the prayer, Porson, but never mind the kidney. I've got a tongue this mornin' like the back of a hedgehog."

Porson bowed.

He got away all right on this occasion as far as that temple of religion, the side-board, where he was adjured to "Look sharp, there's a good feller!"

A "mornin' prayer" proved to be a polite euphemism for a large tumbler, a decanter of whisky, and a bottle of Apollinaris water. Lord Bosket proceeded to mix these ingredients in the nice proportions amenable to a palate that was "like the back of a hedgehog." After imbibing

them with the solemn gusto that an earnest nature takes in a religious rite, he went on to register his customary formal complaint against the quality of the whisky.

"I only lodge the objection, you know, as a mere matter o' form, although they do say that constant droppin's will wear away the Guildhall. But we get no forrarder on this subject. I never take a drink in this house but what I've had to complain to the Stewards. It is such a little matter I should ha' thought something could be done. Is it red-tape or what?"

It was to be gathered from Lord Bosket's particularly querulous air that his domestic intercourse had suffered yet another check to its harmony.

"The missis is back from town on the rampage. And all about nothin', mark you. There'd be an excuse for her if I was a dead wrong 'un, which I'm not. She can't say that I haven't always been a good husband to her. And what do you suppose it's all about this time? Why, simply because while she was away I arranged a little glove fight in the home close, a snug little mill and nothin' more. Quite an informal little affair, don't you know, between two middle-weights of the district for a small purse subscribed by myself and a pal or two. We were goin' to have no press, no publicity, no nothin'. It was goin' to be quite private, tickets by invitation, and everything kept very select, and all as right as rain. But, God bless my soul, you should ha' seen the missis when she got wind of it. It was a degradation to the highest and purest instincts of the lord-knows-what! One-sided I call it. I stand her poets without a word, absolutely without a word, mark you. We've even had anarchists and labour-leaders and Fenians in the house before now, but I can't even go rattin' in a ditch with a terrier pup on a Sunday mornin' but what she calls down fire from heaven. And that's not all; she's got another grievance now, dear old thing. Somebody has told her a cock-and-bull story about Billy havin' resigned his commission in the Blues, and she throws it at me, funny old thing, that I have kept it from her. It was no use my sayin' that it was all my eye. She says it

is a conspiracy to keep her in the dark. You had better let her know, Jane, she's found a mare's nest. But her common-sense ought to tell her."

"On the contrary, Charles, I am afraid Emma is very well informed," said his sister. "We could not afford to keep him in the Blues any longer. Too expensive, you know."

"What, my gell?"

Upon a repetition of the news his jaw was seen to drop.

"That's a nice how d'ye do. Rough on a feller that is, especially a young feller. He oughtn't to ha' done that. Why didn't you speak to me about it? I daresay I could ha' done something in an important matter like that."

"You are very good, Charles, but we really felt we could not hold ourselves indebted to you to any further extent. You have been too generous already."

"If I can't give my own nephew a leg up now and then it's a pity. He's the only lad I've got; and for him to do a thing like that touches me a lot more than a few pounds a year towards his keep would ha' done."

"That only covers part of the motive. His general conduct of late has left much to be desired."

"The feller's young. He's only a boy. Let every colt have its head a bit at the start, I say, especially if there's blood in him. He'll only take it if you don't. Such talk is not like you and Edmund; I've always given you the credit for bein' plain sensible people who know what's what. My ideas aren't worth much beside those of a clever beggar like you, Jane, of course; but if you aren't right off it this time I'm no judge of a hoss. I should ha' thought Edmund would ha' known better. It is a very serious thing for a young feller at his time of life, let me tell you. And what's he goin' into now—the police force?"

"He has left the service for good."

"Wha-a-a-t!"

"He sailed for South Africa, I believe, last Wednesday week. He is going to farm or to prospect for gold, or something of that sort."

Lord Bosket sat bolt upright in his chair, with his glass suspended mid-way to his lips.

" That's won it ! " was all he could say.

The silence around the breakfast table was rather painful.

" A fine lad like that ! I don't know how you could. You had no right to let him go. That lad's mine as much as he is yours, by God he is ! I can't get over it."

The face of Billy's uncle was an abject blank. The silence of all around him remained a little pitiful.

" I feel as though I want to blub," he said. " You have no idea how it touches me, or you wouldn't ha' done it. And this Maud Wayling scheme ; all off—what ? "

" It is," said Mrs. Broke impassively.

For a time her brother rocked himself to and fro in his chair, repeating at intervals in an undertone all sorts of odd phrases, and punctuated them by aimlessly nodding his head. The number of times he did this gloomily and dispassionately it would be hard to say, but he appeared to derive a certain solace from this incantation.

" It is the rottenest thing I ever heard in my life," he broke out at last with vehemence. " What I want to know is, why did not somebody tell *me* ? I would ha' played old Harry rather than it should have happened. I may be wrong, Jane, but this business looks to me as though you and Edmund have been cutting off your noses to spite your faces. That's how it strikes me, and let me tell you that's how it will strike others. It's not like you."

Lord Bosket's distress was very real and unbridled. That of his hearers must have been quite as acute as his own, probably more ; but tact, that thrice-blessed quality, had no existence in his forth-right and ingenuous soul. Broke might sit grim and grey in an inaccessible silence ; his wife might fence and parry, and make obvious attempts to turn the conversation ; the girls might all be staring straight in front of them with faces that grew white and scarlet by turns ; but signals such as these were not for Lord Bosket. As was usual with him, when he was in pain he demanded that it should be shared by others, in the same liberal manner that he was prepared to take the sufferings of other people on the shoulders of himself.

" I can't get over it. I tell you it is the rottenest thing I ever heard. I wonder if it was of his own free will. I

wonder if he shied at Maud Wayling. I'd lay a thousand to five he did. Did he shy at her, Jane, and run away ? "

"I can hardly go into details now, Charles, but you can rest assured that you shall hear them all in due season."

"I'm not goin' to be put off, so you needn't think it. I want to hear them now. This is a personal matter. It touches me. I feel it; how I feel it you don't know. I liked that lad; and one way and another I looked to him to do you a power of good. You may have your reasons, but I tell you beforehand that they have got to be good 'uns to satisfy me."

At this point Mrs. Broke rose from the table and left the room. The girls, in great distress as they were, seized eagerly upon this act to make good their own escape. Broke also followed out gloomily upon their heels, so that in less than a minute the aggrieved Lord Bosket was conducting his soliloquy to the glass of whisky in front of him.

"Well, I am damned!" he continued to repeat, with his legs sprawling under the table, his chin on his breast, and his hands thrust up to the wristbands of his flannel shirt into the pockets of his breeches.

To him in the midst of his soliloquy came the youngest of his nieces with a rather white face. The butler and an assistant were clearing up portions of the breakfast débris.

"Porson, you can leave us for a few minutes," said Delia. "I will ring the bell when I have spoken with his lordship. We are not to be interrupted, please."

She waited for them to go, and observing a key in the door, took the precaution of turning it.

Her Uncle Charles had sat with his back to her while these manœuvres were going forward. She now came and took a seat opposite to him, rested her elbows on the table, and looked at him in a concentrated manner with her chin on her hands.

"Hullo, young 'un," said her uncle with a start. "I didn't notice you there. I thought you had all gone. What do you think of this Billy business? Don't you think it is very wrong and monstrous? I suppose I ought not to say so to you young fillies; but I can't help speaking as I feel, and never could. Wrong and monstrous I call it."

Delia made no reply.

"They won't tell me all, young 'un; but I mean to know. I have a right to know. I am the feller's uncle, do you see; he's the only nephew I've got; and I was very proud of that feller. He was the apple of my eye. Good-looking, honest, straightforward, cheery, manly feller. I expect it's that Maud Wayling. I predicted trouble at the time. I've said to your mother all along it would be a mistake if they tried to force his hand. The right sort won't stand it. I did, I know; but I'm of the weak sort, young 'un, that's me. But I'll give you my word that had I known as much then as I do now no parson livin' would ha' pushed my neck into the halter of holy matrimony."

There was a keen pity in the face of Delia, which was generally there when her Uncle Charles "was in one of his moods." She waited for him to cease speaking; and when he had done so, she said in a perfectly quiet and contained voice—

"Uncle Charles, did you see that accident the other day?"

"Accident? What accident?"

"The accident to the man who was covered in blood. Do you not remember he was in your dogcart when you drove past us in the lane the other day?"

"Oh, that! Who told you it was an accident?"

Lord Bosket's face had become suffused suddenly with a quaint meaning.

A chill spread slowly over Delia's veins.

"It was not an accident, Uncle Charles?"

"I did not say so, young 'un."

"Please tell me, Uncle Charles, how it happened."

Lord Bosket grew wary. He was not the type of man who is likely to be overborne by his superfluity of wisdom, but that concentrated look upon his niece's face would have been startling to the most obtuse uncle in the world. Besides, in a dim fashion he recalled to his mind that old Person, or somebody, had made a rather odd comment on the affair at the time of its occurrence. He was not a Solomon, not a Sherlock Holmes, but for once he must try to put two and two together. He did not like to see the little filly look like that.

"Oh yes, young 'un," he said, attempting a lightness of tone that had not even the merit of deceiving his own ears, "it may have been an accident."

"It was not an accident, Uncle Charles."

Delia made this announcement in a tone that had a rather uncomfortable amount of decision in it. Somehow her face was not altogether nice to look at.

"Wasn't it?" said her uncle, with an admirable caution.

"Did you see it, Uncle Charles?"

"A bit of it. I may have seen a bit of it."

"Please tell me what you saw."

"I—I don't think I ought, young 'un. Little gells should not be so curious, what?"

"It was not an accident at all, Uncle Charles."

"Wasn't it?"

"You are trying to deceive me, Uncle Charles."

"Why should I try to deceive you, you silly little gell?"

"Because it was not an accident."

"Well, I never said it was, did I? But whatever it was, little Miss Muffet, be ruled by me and think no more about it."

"You must please tell me what happened, Uncle Charles."

"You must please forget all about it, little Miss Poppet. I daresay it gave you all a bit of a shock to come on a bleeding man suddenly like that; but what's the odds, it is no business of anybody's. Your father——"

"My father?" said Delia.

Our tactful gentleman saw his mistake almost before he had made it. But his niece had pounced upon it like a hawk already.

"My father?"

"Never mind your father; we will drop the subject, eh? Little gells should not worry their little heads about things they can't understand, eh? Now be a good and sensible little gell, and the very next time I come I will bring you a four-pound box of chocolate creams from Crossby's, the biggest they keep and the best quality."

"What did my father do?"

"I don't know," said Lord Boxket, with a lame and somewhat hurried recourse to his tumbler.

" You do know, Uncle Charles, and I insist that you tell me."

On Delia's side was a close-breathing quietude that was extraordinary. The tones were firm and even; the eyes were wide open; not a muscle faltered. The demand, made without emotion of any kind, admitted of no compromise.

" Damn it all!" said Lord Bosket, beginning to wriggle in his chair. He was growing mightily uncomfortable. " You ought not to ask me, you know, and I ought not to tell you."

" I insist, Uncle Charles."

The cold and stern face, still propped on the stiff hands, was so calm and hard that it began to have a kind of baleful attraction for the uneasy gentleman, whose whisky glass shook in his hands. It was the rummest face he had ever seen on anybody, man or woman!

" You mustn't ask me, you know. It is not good for little gells to know everything."

" My father insulted him and afterwards struck him."

" I did not say so, young 'un, and you can't say I did."

" You shall not deny it, Uncle Charles."

" Who said I wanted to deny it, you silly little beggar? Why should I? What's the odds one way or the other? Even if your father did cut up rough he wouldn't without the best of reasons, would he? Come now, let it go at that, and don't trouble your silly little head about it any more; and be a good little gell."

" You admit it, Uncle Charles?"

Lord Bosket looked at his niece with whimsical and rather bleared eyes. It had come to something when a little niece not much bigger than a pussy cat, and in years not much above a two-year-old was able to bully and browbeat a man of his age. But yet he felt he had not a thousand-to-one chance against her. It was the solidest chip of determination ever formed out of a human soul. He felt that the little devil had got a will that was worth that of ten such men as himself. He had never seen a woman with a face like that; he was damned if he would not rather have had to face the missis at her worst!

" You admit it, Uncle Charles?" said the unrelenting voice.

"Well, and suppose I do, what's the odds, you funny little fool? You can take it from me that your father had good reasons for anything he did."

"He attacked a defenceless man; a man weaker than himself and smaller."

The tone continued to be perfectly quiet and unemotional.

"Rubbish," said Lord Bosket. "Don't think about it like that, you little silly. It is not a thing to make a song about. It is a mere nothing; take it from me. I daresay the feller was insolent."

"You do not know that, Uncle Charles; and one ought not to say what one does not know to be the truth."

"No, I suppose one ought not."

He was completely taken aback for the moment by the extraordinary manner of his youthful niece. Suddenly it made him laugh.

"But you are gettin' to be a rum little devil, aren't you? Damned if I know what to make of you! This is not the little Miss Muffet I used to know, quiet as a mouse, and as simple as a baby. If you go on like this, miss, you will be a terror, you will. You haven't been taking lessons from your Aunt Emma for nothing, you've not; when you run your match with her you won't run second, you won't. You are a little devil. Still, give me a kiss and we won't worry our heads any more about it, will we? As I say, what's the odds? Your father should be a judge of his own affairs. Little gells must not bother their heads about 'em. Now, Miss Poppet, not another word; and you shall have those chocolates the very next time I come."

In this delicately wise and paternal fashion the subject was dismissed. Delia unlocked the door and went out of the room. Lord Bosket continued to confront his glass for some little time afterwards. Somehow his thoughts would continue to revert to the singular interview he had just had with the youngest of all his nieces; and for the time being they overlaid those in regard to his nephew so recently in his mind. To find such a particularly mysterious manner in one of his "little chestnut fillies" was something quite new. Their hearts were whole and unclouded, as frank and simple as the day. The young

'un defeated him altogether. He could not remember to have seen a woman look like that before, and he did not want to see one look like it again. It had got home on him in a way that had rather upset him, damn it all!

This sense of discomfort continued to linger in his mind when, after breakfast, he went his way. He did not communicate any of the doubts that invaded it to his sister or to Broke, because, after all, the interview might be nothing more significant than the outcome of a childish curiosity; and her manner might have owed its strangeness to the way in which the sight of a bleeding man had wrought on her girlish mind. Women were supposed to be a bit squeamish in these things; and the fact that her father had hit another man might have outraged her sense of delicacy a little. Indeed, the only terms in which he permitted himself to refer to the subject at all was when he said into Broke's ear privately as he was on the point of quitting the house—

"Have you had a police-court summons yet, Edmund? If I am on the bench, my boy, I shall be dead against you."

Broke smiled a grim acknowledgment of the joke.

At the luncheon table Mrs. Broke made a comment on the absence of Delia. Did any one know why she was not present? Was she unwell? Nobody knew. She had not been seen since breakfast. The matter was pursued no farther at that time. Most probably she was sulking in her bedroom. They believed her to be capable of almost any enormity.

Her absence from that pious rite, afternoon tea, was not remarked, because she was still forbidden their common-room. But when dinner came and her absence was again remarked, Mrs. Broke's inquiries grew more insistent. A maid was despatched to her room, only to return with the information that she was not there.

As the hours passed that evening, and the child did not return, a feeling of uneasiness grew abroad. It became a matter of comment that she had been rather strange in her manner of late; instances of it were recalled; reminiscences came unbidden to their minds of the singular attitude she had adopted on many questions that did not admit of two points of view. But not for a moment, however, did

they condescend to follow their speculations to their logical, their natural, their inevitable conclusion. They were face to face with her absence. It could only be reconciled on one assumption; and that was precisely the one their dignity would not allow them to make. The hideous idea was in the minds of them all; but without communicating it to one another her five sisters were as one in the feeling that it was too monstrous, too gross, too far-fetched. To admit for a moment that her strange unhappiness had induced her to run away from home, was impossible. It would be a treason against her clan.

When Mrs. Broke had put more strenuous inquiries afoot among the servants, the butler was able to recall a fact that was invested now with a deep significance. He mentioned Miss Delia's bidding himself and Capper leave the room when they were clearing away breakfast, in order that she might have a private interview with his lordship, who was still seated at the table.

"And if I am not mistaken, ma'am, she locked the door when we left the room."

"You have no idea, Porson, of what she said to his lordship?"

Porson had not. Thereon Mrs. Broke, true to her instinct for action in times of crisis, despatched a mounted messenger to Hipsley for the purpose of summoning her brother to Covenden at once. The man returned in something under an hour with the news that Lord Bosket was from home and that nothing had been seen or heard of him all day. In the meantime inquiries at the porter's lodge had elicited the fact that Delia had been seen to pass through the gates at about a quarter past ten that morning. No attention had been paid to the direction she had taken, and she had not been seen to return.

On the stroke of midnight, however, their more immediate anxieties were allayed by the arrival of a telegram. It ran: "Filly all right. Letter in the morning. Charles." It bore the stamp of Charing Cross.

CHAPTER XXXIV

Providential Behaviour of old Pearce

LORD BOSKET'S wanderings in the quest of an alleviation to his lot took him in the course of that afternoon to a cricket match some dozen miles away. His taste had the all-embracing catholicity of the true sportsman. Wherever two sides contended, or one living thing was pitted against another, the contest ensuing was sure of his patronage. Two spiders on a hot plate, or a pair of mongrels in an entry, provided one was matched against the other, were enough to allure his imagination, and to excite his lust for finding the winner. Therefore three o'clock this summer afternoon found him mingling with the throng in Bushmills Park that was witnessing the first innings of the Free Foresters in their game with I Zingari.

His arrival on the ground was a signal for mild commotion. Acquaintances of his own sex slapped him on the back, punched him in the ribs, waved their hands to him, and acclaimed him from every possible quarter. Long-field-on, in his after-luncheon nap against the corner of the bowling screen, awoke sufficiently to murmur, "Hullo, Bos!" Acquaintances of the opposite sex sat up and purred, lifted their eyes to him, confided to him their gloved paws, made very pretty *moues* indeed, and by delicately perceptible fluctuations of their drapery gave graceful indications that there was room for dear Lord Bosket to come and sit beside them. Everybody fêted him. He was buttonholed by this person and that. They were three deep around him in the luncheon tent to take turns to engage in conversation with him, whither he had been escorted by another body of his friends to have a drink.

There is no man who enjoys the popularity of him

with a reputation for good nature. It lands him high and dry on a pinnacle it is given to few to attain. It makes its appeal to all sorts and conditions of men. For does not such a guarantee of single-mindedness grow rarer and rarer under the stress of our progress? The wear-and-tear becomes too great. The skyey influences are averse. Our friend's querulous melancholy was like an oasis in the desert of a self-satisfied austerity. Old Bos was not so confoundedly superior. A reputation of this kind stood him in far better stead than the most brilliant intellectual gifts or a life of virgin purity. Where the amiable weaknesses of others could not have been condoned, no cause of offence was to be discerned in such an idol of the populace.

In the course of an hour our friend had disengaged himself from several groups of these clamorous persons, ultimately to fall into the clutches of a celebrated sporting baronet who lived in the neighbourhood. Our old friend, Sir Horatio, and other experts in this recondite lore, inform us that there are always two peculiarities by which a baronet may be identified. He is invariably "celebrated" and as invariably "sporting." This one was of the unimpeachable variety, the true genus that keeps more "gees" in its stable than it does in its vocabulary. He was of the most familiar type of celebrated sporting baronet that tradition has made dear to us, which affects a high-crowned square felt hat, snuff-coloured clothes, a horse-shoe pin, and brown gaiters. He had the ruddy bluff look of the farmer, with brusquerie and absence of manners to match.

"How are you, Bos?" he said heartily. "Fine day for the race."

"Devilish," said Lord Bosket. "Come and have a drink."

"Don't mind. I've got something to tell you, only I can't think what."

"Fancy anything for the July meetin'?"

"The Dwarf; and Gub Gub for a place. Now, what is it I want to tell you? Something—something funny."

"Seen the weights for Newmarket?"

"Not I. Now I've got it. A sing'lar thing I saw this mornin'. One of those nieces of yours."

"What, what, Pearce," said Lord Bosket with a sudden eagerness. Something had given a great leap under his waistcoat.

"I think it must have been the youngest of 'em, if I remember 'em right."

"Well, well, Pearce," said Lord Bosket impatiently; the athletic performance under his waistcoat had been repeated.

"I met her walkin' along the high road covered up to the neck in dust."

"When—this mornin'? Nothing very funny in that."

"You hold on a bit, old son. I'm comin' to the funny part. She stopped me and said, 'If you please, is this the road to London?' I told her if she walked another forty miles or so along it she would find herself about there. If she had started from her place she must have walked more than ten already, and a broilin' hot day. I couldn't understand it at all. It seemed a sing'lar thing for one of your little chestnuts to ask a question like that, and to ask it as though she meant to do every yard of the distance on her flat feet. I wanted to tell you, Bos; in my opinion, it's a thing you ought to know."

"It couldn't ha' been one o' my fillies."

Conviction was grievously lacking in the tone of Delia's uncle.

"Don't you bother your head about that, my boy. Do you think I don't know one of that kennel when I see one? She'd got a nose on her like a knocker on a door. One of the old pattern, or my eyesight's failin'; Edmund himself doesn't carry a better."

"Go on, Pearce, nose isn't everything."

"It is with that kennel, my boy. I'll own, when I first saw her I thought she was a dam sight too handsome to be one of your litter. She'd got two eyes to her like a pair of stars, and that blue that the sky was a fool to 'em. I wondered how the dooce that sort came into your kennel, Bos. Against the regulations, ain't it? But I always say a woman is the same as a good bitch. The breed makes all the difference. She may strike you as ugly at first, but just wait till you've gone over her points, and then you find out she's about as handsome as paint.

That one was a nailer, my boy, and no error. And I don't mind telling you, Bos, that when I saw that thoroughbred tit of yours marching down the road with her little chin in the air, and as proud and dainty on her feet as a three-year-old, I thought her a stepper."

Lord Bosket gave vent to his feelings in a whistle very deep and long.

"Well, I am damned! Come and have a drink, Pearce. This is a nice how-d'ye-do!"

Another libation in the tent brought no comfort to Delia's uncle. Her behaviour at the breakfast table had been bitten too sharply in his mind. He began to blame himself bitterly, as his habit was when things went amiss, on the score of his own folly. He ought to have known she was up to something. He ought to have known that no little filly had a right to look as she had looked that morning. She might well have a rum manner, if she had made up her mind to run away from home. But he could not believe one of his nieces to be capable of such an act. They were the last people in the world to do such a thing. What would Edmund say? Whatever had possessed her?

In the course of the next quarter of an hour his mind, heavily shackled in whisky as it was, had brought him to the conclusion that there was only one thing to do. He must go after her at once. The road to London ran by the gates of Bushmills Park, and London was clearly her destination. As he climbed into his trap and took the reins from his man, and trotted away on his absurd errand, the incredible folly of the little fool recurred to him. To walk forty miles to London in the blazing heat of a midsummer day was the maddest thing he had ever heard. If she wanted to get there why did she not have the ordinary common-sense to go by train? The little fool must be mad!

He would like to ask also what did she propose to do when she got there? She would not be likely to go to her friends, mad as she was, for that would only be to be packed straight back home again. But that was the only project she could have in her mind. It was almost certain that a mere whim had possessed her; that the heat of her

folly would soon cool; and that she would hail a restoration to the fold. But she would catch it pretty hot when she did go home, if he knew anything of her father! And there was no doubt whatever in his mind that women were rum beggars when they liked. She had wormed a secret out of him that she had no right to hear; and to express her opinion of it, in an absurdly literal sense, she calmly ran away from home. He could see now more clearly than ever that he ought not to have told her. He felt at the time he was making a great mistake.

As he passed the milestones on the dusty road, the face and manner of his niece recurred to him vividly and perpetually. Of course he ought to have known, besotted fool that he was, that mischief was brewing. The little tit had no right to that sort of look. At the breakfast table it had disconcerted him; and it came out at him now through the sunlight, through the dust-coated hedges and the abundant foliage in a fashion that made him as thoroughly uncomfortable as it did when he first saw it that morning.

As the raking stride of the horse took him up hill and down dale, and devoured the endless undulating ribbon of white road, doubt invaded him. He might, after all, be on a wild-goose chase. When you looked at it reasonably the thing seemed impossible. What a great "score" off him it would be for old Pearce, if it was a mere first-of-April fake. How everybody would chuckle and tell it against him! But still, old Pearce was not that sort of feller. He had been very circumstantial about it too, and he was the last man in the world to put a child's trick upon you. All the same, by the time his good horse's stride had devoured a dozen miles or so of the dusty road, the grotesqueness of his mission assumed a higher significance, and its sanity a less. With deeper conviction he began to affirm that the whole business was too preposterous.

Nevertheless he continued to go on. The phantom of a so-calm and frigid little face lured him forward mile by mile, where cold reason demanded that he should right-about-face and return. But no, he would see it through. They might have the laugh at him afterwards, they would have very likely, but the sportsman in him was enough of itself to take him all the way. He pulled up at wayside

inns on two occasions, ostensibly to obtain information of a young gell asking the road to London, but also to obtain a little light refreshment in a liquid form. Of the one they were able to give cheerfully, but of the other they could not an they would.

By the time the dogcart had covered twenty miles the sun had taken a very decided dip. It was a perfect evening of early summer. Mellow lights suffused the clover; not a leaf stirred by the roadside, so absolutely still was the air; while the trees stood motionless to trail their long shadows in the dust. Now and then a bird hovered over hedges, an occasional hare ran along the road, and rabbits darted in all directions, hoisting their little white scuts. It began to grow dusk. The dubious tints of the twilight were reflected powerfully in Lord Bosket. A milestone told him that twelve miles farther on he would be in London. The odds were enormous against his finding his quarry. Still he was going all the way. He would never hear the last of the story they would tell against him—that he drove into town on a summer's evening from Bushmills Park, because old Pearce had told him a cock-and-bull tale about one of his nieces asking her way to London. But whether he found the little gell or not he was going all the way; let 'em say what they liked when they heard about it.

To that end he eased the paces of his horse. He looked at his watch; it wanted five-and-twenty minutes to nine o'clock. He had now come twenty-five miles from Bushmills Park as nearly as he could calculate; about thirty-five from Hipsley; and thirty-seven from Covenden. It was hardly likely that she had walked so far through all this infernal dust, in such a broiling day of midsummer. The odds were a thousand to five that he had missed her, or that she had never come.

His optimism was not increased by the fact that unmistakable evidences were beginning to assert themselves in him. It was already an hour past the time at which he preferred to dine; and it would be a good nine miles yet before he touched the suburbs of London. Hereabouts he came to a hill; and in walking his horse up it encountered a farmer in a covered cart coming down.

"I say," he called out, "have you met a little gell

walkin' towards London? Don't happen to have seen one, do you?"

"Aye," said the farmer, "so I have. I passed one about a quarter of a mile back, covered in dust about as white as a miller. Looks as though she's been tramping it all day. And she's that lame she can hardly put one foot afore t'other. Better give her a lift, guv'nor, if you are going her way. Her goose is about cooked, I reckon."

"Well, I am damned," said Lord Bosket, pressing on.

The sun was much lower now. The patch of crimson-yellow with which it had painted the sky behind him had deepened to tints more complex and mysterious. The moon had assumed a faint outline, and the evening was growing chill. Confronted by a hill stiffer than usual, he took his tired horse carefully to the top. On the crest a heap of flints for road-mending purposes had been shot beside a hedge, and seated on them was the little figure of a woman. From head to foot was she clothed in a mantle of dust, about as white as a miller, as the farmer had said. She was breathing hard; there was not a speck of colour in her face; she had taken off her straw hat, but her hair, a lightish chestnut colour, had not lost its orderliness of arrangement and serenity of form. The distress of her condition was cruelly apparent, and the limp lines into which her small figure fell caused Lord Bosket to give a grunt of dismay.

Delia did not see her uncle at first. Her eyes were turned towards the long and deep valley into which this hill ran down. They were fixed with a concentrated intensity on the stretch of white road, ankle deep in dust on which the shadows were beginning to creep darker and darker: the road to London. Her hands were clasped round her knees. Hearing the sound of wheels hard by, she turned her head so slightly that it seemed to imply that the power was not in her to turn it farther; and asked without looking at vehicle or driver—

"How far to London, please?"

"You damned young fool!" was the answer she received.

Already it had struck Lord Bosket with a sensation of horror that the tone in which she asked the question was

that of their interview at the breakfast table. She did not appear to recognize the voice of her uncle, but at his words she turned her head towards him with a bewildered expression. The grey hue of her face had something of the intolerable weariness of death.

Lord Bosket was already out of his dogcart.

"You damned young fool!" he said again roughly.

Delia did not reply. Her lips were pressed very tight, so tight that she did not seem to possess the energy to force them apart.

Her uncle, meeting with no reply, stood in front of her in his time-honoured attitude, with his hands in the pockets of his breeches. He looked her over keenly. She was dead beat.

"Poor little gell," he grunted.

He then began to emit his peculiar long-drawn whistle. The virtue of it at that moment was not very clear, unless it was a natural tonic to his wits. At least it served to summon his practical nature to his aid, for his next act was to take from an inside pocket of his covert coat a flask containing his favourite stimulant.

"Down with it," he said gruffly.

Delia seized the cup with something akin to ferocity, and without giving the slightest heed to the contents, drank eagerly.

"Poor little gell," said Lord Bosket, speaking in the manner of one who suffers from a sore throat.

There was that in her act which suddenly bleared his eyes more effectually than ever. He wiped out the impedimenta sedulously with his handkerchief, and blew his nose with tremendous vehemence.

"I am old enough to know better," he muttered to his man as he turned away his face from the cause of all this inconvenience. Presently, having resumed a sufficient command of his demeanour to venture to address his young niece, who still sat motionless on the heap of stones, he did so in a voice of hoarse expostulation—

"You have walked forty miles as near as damn it, in all that broiling sun, and if you have not about done for yourself, it's God's mercy, that's all I've got to say about it. I will drive you into London, and we shall have to go home

by train in the morning. You are in no state to go back to-night. We must have you between the blankets as soon as we can. It is the maddest business I ever heard of in my life. However, this is not the time for talk. Into the trap with you."

He made to take the small figure in his arms, for the purpose of hoisting it into the vehicle, as it showed no signs of moving of its own accord.

"Please, Uncle Charles, you are not to touch me."

Her tone and manner were as extraordinarily uncompromising as they were at nine o'clock that morning.

"What, what?" said her uncle, taken aback.

Delia did not move an inch. Lord Bosket approached indecisively.

"Please, do not touch me, Uncle Charles."

"Not touch you, young fool," he said querulously and hoarsely. "I ought to be takin' the skin off your back, miss, if I was doin' the right thing by you. Not touch you, indeed!"

As her uncle stretched out his hand to seize her, in the tentative manner that he might seize a kitten, she made a little motion by which she gathered her dust-laden skirts away from him.

"You must leave me, Uncle Charles. I must not, I cannot go with you."

Her tone was absolutely final. Lord Bosket was fully conscious already of his own impotence before it.

"Nonsense; tut, tut!" he said persuasively. "Never heard such a thing in my life. Where do you think you are goin' to, and what do you think is goin' to become of you? You can't stop here all night, that's a moral."

"You will take me to Covenden."

"Of course, to-morrow."

"I can never go to Covenden again."

Once more Lord Bosket recorded his stupefaction with a whistle. He did not know how to handle such an uncompromising determination. He was not fitted to do so by nature. Here, in this overdriven, overborne bit of a thing, was a problem that he had neither the wit to understand nor the strength to grapple with.

"You've damn well got to," he said.

Delia, however, stuck quietly to the other view.

"Come, don't be a little silly. Let me put you into the trap."

"I will not be put into the trap, Uncle Charles."

"Rot. Rubbish. You don't know what you are sayin'. Come, now, be a sensible little gell, and when you get home I will give you a nice new hoss with four white stockings."

Our friend held out his hand with a gesture half of testiness, half of cajolery. Delia closed her eyes and hugged her knees tighter.

"Come on, there's a good little gell."

He approached her in the wary manner of a cat catching a bird, and suddenly put his arms round her. He found her to be very cold and trembling violently.

"I forbid you to touch me, Uncle Charles."

She began to struggle fitfully in her uncle's irresolute grasp. Her heart was beating wildly through her dress.

"I will jump out of the trap," she said.

With all this decision of language and behaviour in one ordinarily so docile, there was a complete absence of emotion in the voice and gesture by which it was embodied. They were both so hard that Lord Bosket was baffled by it, and perhaps a little frightened also. He had never seen anything so uncanny. He did not know whether the poor little devil had become slightly insane, a bit touched by the sun, or what, but this was certainly not the timid tender petted little filly he had always known. There was a dreary piteousness underlying it all too, that at times made him take in his breath rather sharply. He would be perfectly justified in resorting to compulsion in a case of this sort; but even as he gathered himself to employ it, a sudden nausea inflicted him. No, he was damned if he could be rough with her. He had never laid his finger on a woman yet, and even if her parents blamed him bitterly afterwards, it was asking too much of a man at his time of life to begin that sort of thing now.

"You must tell me all about it then," he said, in tones which, in spite of himself, were conciliatory. Then realising, somewhat to his dismay, that they were of that nature when they were certainly not intended to be so, he gave

himself up to luxury. He drew her cold face to his coat, and gave it a hug. "Tell your damned old fool of an uncle all about it, you poor little soul. No harm shall come to you, I'll give you my word."

"Promise, Uncle Charles, you will not take me to Covenden." She permitted her wan cheek to lie an instant against him and closed her eyes.

"I can't do that, you know. I would if I could, but I mustn't, you know. I'm bound to see you home all right."

Delia, half fainting in his arms from hunger, thirst and weariness, remained perfectly inexorable on that point. More and more fully did her uncle realise that his clay was not stern enough, not anything like stern enough, to cope with such a stony resolution. He saw clearly that unless he gave his promise no progress was possible. Things would remain at a deadlock, and already it was nearly pitch dark. "She ought to have a damned good hidin', but I'm hanged if I can give it her," he recorded for his own private information and that of his man, as he hugged her tighter to his coat.

"Come, come, miss, no damn nonsense."

Gently he tried to lift her. At once she began to struggle convulsively.

"Promise, Uncle Charles."

"I can't, you know. I mustn't, you know."

"Leave me then, Uncle Charles. I must go on alone."

With a sudden movement of an amazing quickness she had slipped his grasp.

Lord Bosket knew already that he was defeated. Good nature is an asset from the social point of view, but it would appear that it has its drawbacks in the occasional stress of the unartificial affairs of life.

"Very well, then," he said gruffly, "I give in; I promise; I chuck up the sponge."

"You promise also not to take me to Grosvenor Street, Uncle Charles?"

"I may be a fool, but I am not a damned fool, I hope," said Lord Bosket with some alacrity. In his opinion, the undesirability of his own house as a place of refuge did not require to be stated.

" Where do you mean to take me, Uncle Charles ? "

" God knows ! "

On the strength of this assurance Delia climbed up into the dogcart. It caused her uncle to shed more curses to observe, as she did so, that she was dead lame; also that twice she nearly missed her footing on the awkward step and reeled against the cushion when she entered the vehicle at last. It was still a soft-breathing summer evening, but faintly chill, yet her uncle was surprised to find how cold she was as she nestled in the small space between him and the man. He took off his covert coat, wrapped her in it, placed one arm tenderly round her, and drew her cold cheeks against his jacket.

" If you must go to London why did you walk, you little fool ? "

That absurd but palpable fact stuck in his practical throat.

" I had no money," said Delia simply.

" As rotten a reason as ever I heard. Why didn't you borrow a bit ? "

It seemed to Lord Bosket that such a reason was indeed very odd and inadequate. But there could be no doubt that, as far as it went, it was a sufficient one. Suddenly a new thought started up in him, and harrowed his well-fed feelings.

" You are not goin' to tell me that you have been walkin' in the hot sun since ten o'clock this morning without a crumb to peck or a drop to drink ? "

" Yes," said Delia.

" Well, that's won it ! "

Lord Bosket was heard to swear with hoarse vehemence. " No money ; nothing to eat ! " he repeated several times under his breath, apparently to impress the incredible fact on his mind.

" Shove along, Thompson," he said to the man impatiently.

" Where, your lordship ? "

" Better ask me another. I give it up. I can't take her to the club, and I can't take her to Grosvenor Street. I suppose we had better point for one of those barracks in Northumberland Avenue. Shove on, my

boy; poor old Bendy looks like havin' his bellyful this time, if he never had it full before."

"And where were you goin' to even if you got as far as London? if I might make so bold as to inquire," our bewildered friend demanded of his niece.

Delia did not reply.

"Come on, out with it. You've got my word, haven't you? I shall not give you away, you poor little devil."

Probably as a token of her confidence in him, Delia answered: "I was going to No. 403, Charing Cross Road."

"And who the devil lives at 403, Charing Cross Road?"

"It is the office of the *International Review*."

"Oh, indeed! very interesting to be sure. But I don't quite see what that was goin' to do for you."

"Mr. Porter is on the staff of the *International Review*."

"Oh, is he! Very nice for the *International Review*. But who the deuce is Mr. Porter?"

Now that Delia was committed to her statement she did not flinch from making it.

"Mr. Porter loves me, Uncle Charles."

"Oh, does he!" said her Uncle Charles. "Very good of Mr. Porter, I'm sure. But I don't quite follow. What the devil has all this got to do with your runnin' away from home?"

"I love him," said Delia with her singular precision of voice and phrase.

"Oh, do you! Nice for Mr. Porter."

Lord Bosket could not repress a rather weary guffaw, which he proceeded to impart to the air of the night.

"These are all very excellent reasons, miss, I don't doubt; and I daresay it is because I am such a fuddle-headed sort of a feller that I don't see what they have got to do with it at all. You walk forty miles on the hottest day of the year, with not a crumb to eat or a drop to drink, and not a sou in your pocket, in order that if you are lucky you will be able to drop down dead on the door-step of a locked-up newspaper office in the Charing Cross Road about midnight. I daresay now and again I do drink a glass or two more than I ought, but I am damned if I can quite see——"

Lord Bosket finished his somewhat impassioned summing

up of the case as it presented itself to his judicial mind, with a deep but wholly irrelevant malediction. Hour by hour his liberties with our chaste common tongue had become more egregious and unpardonable. We feel that this chapter has already alienated every right-minded human being who has had the temerity to follow his fortunes as far; and are assured that the dear evangelical old maiden lady, whose unhappy task it has been to review our pages for the *Spectator* has renounced them long ago, sent out her maid to call in the cat, and retired to bed with a sick headache; therefore we hesitate to pile Pelion on Ossa by revealing the immediate terms in which our profligate friend saw fit to clothe his thoughts! For a ray of light had burst upon him at last. There was the whole thing. Porter was the young man that Edmund had come such a cropper over. Everything was embraced in that flash of inspiration. He issued once more his peculiar long-drawn whistle to the night air in honour of his re-awakened intelligence.

Yes, there was the whole matter as plain as the back of your hand. And a pretty how-d'ye-do it was! There would be the devil to pay. He had let himself in for a nice thing, hanged if he had not! The sense of his position oppressed him dreadfully. If ever he had had any tact, any delicacy, any worldly wisdom—and very grievously did he doubt whether he had ever had any of these delectable things—he must prepare to utilize them now. Edmund could be an ugly brute when you once got his blood up. And it seemed that this fragile slip of a thing, not much bigger than your hat, was no unworthy daughter of such a sire. She would have died on that heap of flints by the side of the road rather than go back home.

However, this was not the time to dwell on the dilemma in which he had so suddenly come to find himself. The lamp-posts of suburban London were already flitting past; it had become perfectly dark; and the cold burden in his arms had grown a good deal heavier. His immediate thoughts must be for that worn-out and famished little slip of womanhood nestling to his coat for warmth, who, dead lame and starving as she was, was prepared to die rather than give in.

"It's God's mercy I met old Pearce! Poor little devil—poor little devil! Rum beggars women, when they like!"

Hardly had he enunciated this pearl of wisdom for his own consolation, when a new discovery obtruded itself upon him. His small niece was become insensible in his arms.

CHAPTER XXXV

In which we find our First Comedian once more in a Happy Vein

THE letter Lord Bosket addressed at a late hour that evening to Covenden from a hotel in Northumberland Avenue, was the longest and most singular he ever felt called upon to pen in the whole course of his unliterary life. With a sure instinct that was worth more than a superficial observation of men and things, he addressed this lucubration to his sister, rather than to Delia's father. A mere observer would have said without hesitation that the child was far less likely to meet with tender handling from her mother than from him, whose affection for his girls, one and all, was so unbridled ; but her uncle's instinct taught him better. And instinct is a strange matter, as the eminent Sir John Falstaff once had occasion to remark.

When on the following morning Mrs. Broke found an envelope in her brother's crude and uncertain hand, at the side of her plate, she smiled faintly to observe its thickness. As a rule, Charles's correspondence was conducted by the medium of the telegraph. History was indeed getting itself written at a furious pace when in a single day he had recourse to eight pages of notepaper to keep up with the march of events.

He began his letter with the assurance that he, and he alone, was to blame for what had happened. Had he only had the sense to keep quiet things might have been otherwise. He had inadvertently let drop at the breakfast table that morning the details of a certain incident with which

Edmund was very well acquainted. He then proceeded to give a résumé of the providential behaviour of old Pearce at the cricket match; the subsequent pursuit and capture of the runaway; and went on to convey a somewhat forcible idea of the state Delia was in physically and mentally, and laid stress on the fact, with the aid of double lines, under the words, that she had walked forty miles, "as near as damn it," without a penny in her pocket with which to obtain anything to eat or drink; without protection from the sun; and that, dead lame as she was, had it not been God's mercy that he should have been allowed to overtake her, there was that within her that would have carried her on and on, until she dropped down dead upon the road.

Her uncle concluded with an appeal. He was sure that she (Jane) would see the thing in a proper light, and make things as easy for the poor little devil as she could; but somehow he had not the same confidence in Edmund. Edmund had a heart of gold, provided you did not get his back up, but if once that operation was performed he was about the most unreasonable fellow in the world. She must do what she could to get him not to be too hard on the little filly. He supposed, strickly speaking, justice required she should have a good hiding, or something of that sort, but he was sure that to adopt such a course would be a great mistake. If anything was to be done, it would have to be done by kindness. Further, he stated that his own position in the matter was one of difficulty. They would expect him, of course, to bring her home again at once; but he could hardly do that, because he had already given his word not to do so. In extenuation of his own conduct on this point, he said, strange as it might seem, he was obliged to make a promise to the little fool to remain neutral in the matter, or he could have done absolutely nothing with her without resorting to brute force; and he hoped they did not expect him to do that. He felt himself rather to be in the position of a judge, who had to look after the interests of both parties; of a judge, who had to be impartial and see that justice was properly administered, without committing himself to either side.

The tone of his long letter, however, and particularly this latter part, was hard to reconcile with this judicial attitude. It was special pleading, all compact. There seemed no attempt in it, as far as his sister could see, to observe the neutrality of which he made a profession. Finally he said: "Of course, her behaviour has been that of the damnedest little fool; but you can tell Edmund from me that if he had seen her dead beat on that heap of flints by the side of the road, and night coming on, a few things might have been driven into him. They were into me, I can tell you! And you can tell Edmund from me that whatever she's done she is not far off the finest little filly I have seen in my life, and that is saying a lot, because I flatter myself I know one when I see one. There are points about the poor little devil that make you pause and wonder. She is asleep now; and although she has been through a great deal, I do not think you need be anxious about her. I let a "vet" see her as soon as we got here, and we were careful about her feed and put her to bed with hot-water bottles. Her feet are in a shocking bad state; the little fool came away in a pair of racing shoes; and I am not sure that the sun has not caught her head a bit. But the "vet" says a night's rest will do wonders. I am going to stay with her here until you decide on what is to be done. Do not blame me for not bringing her back. Can't very well go back on my promise. P.S.—Mum's the word with the missis."

Mrs. Broke took the first opportunity of discussing the contents of this letter with Broke. They had both passed a peculiarly unhappy night, but this communication did not bring them peace of mind. Broke read every line with care and solemnity. When he returned it to her after so doing, his face was the colour of the grey-tinted paper on which it was written. He did not speak.

"We are dead out of luck," said his wife, looking at him nervously. Of late she had learned to hold him in fear.

Broke still did not speak.

"I think Charles has acted very well," she said, with no attempt to conceal the anxiety of her tone. "And for once, Edmund, I do hope you will allow Charles to be a

judge. I am perfectly convinced that his attitude is the right one. We have alienated the child, and if we are to win her back again we can only hope to do so by exhibiting the greatest care, the greatest tact, the greatest delicacy."

"What do you mean?" said Broke in a husky voice.

"There is hardly a need to explain. It is easy to see from the way in which Charles has worded his letter that the child has refused to return."

Broke turned his grim eyes on his wife.

"You talk as though you want her to return."

"Of course—of course," she said, with a slight air of bewilderment. "Of course, Edmund, we want her to return."

Broke was seen to lift his head and take the limp lines out of his bearing.

"You must set your mind at rest on that point. She will never come back here."

His deliberately chosen syllables arrested the blood in her arteries.

"I—I don't understand," she said, with her hands going up to her face.

The dismal weariness in her voice was a little piteous.

Man and wife stood to confront one another like a pair of phantoms who afflict each other with their presence. Broke saw the look on her face, and heard the tones of her voice. He laid his hand on her shoulder firmly, but with a certain kindness.

"Steady, old girl," he said.

"It is a little inhuman," said the mother. There was a chord in her that he heard then for the first time.

Broke waved away the accusation with his hands.

"I must decline to discuss it," he said, "in any aspect. It does not admit of discussion."

But it was impossible for Mrs. Broke to deliver up this second child without a struggle, a last convulsive struggle of despair. The loss of her son had told on her redoubtable fibres more heavily than anybody could have guessed. She had to the full the female share of reverence for the dictates of the male, in the things that were material, for she was too wise to hold herself in any way above her sex. Her intelligence was too keen to allow her to inter-

pose it against one who had an immemorial right to use his own; but for all her Minerva-like attributes she was pre-eminently a woman. She could not stand by while a second child of her flesh perished before her eyes, without stretching forth a hand to snatch it from the abyss.

"Edmund," said the bowed woman, clutching at a table for support, "it is impossible that you can know what you say. It is inhuman to punish an act of girlish folly so inexorably. She is but a child. She did not know what she did."

Broke made an imperious wave of the arm, as though to put her off. His head was aloof, but she could discern dimly that the awful clenched ashen look was in him still.

"You cannot do it, Edmund. You shall not do it. Your son was of your own stuff, and it was your right to deal with him as you thought proper. But you shall not treat a woman in that manner; you shall not, indeed."

Broke was like a statue.

"I claim my prescriptive right as a woman to deal with my children of my own sex."

"You have no jurisdiction in a matter of this kind," said Broke in a dry voice.

"Then I claim that consideration my sex is accustomed to receive in civilized communities. It is an act of barbarism to apply the same code to women as to men."

"They can be equally guilty."

"The first precept of our civilization should teach us to condone their faults."

"I shall not make phrases with you. It is enough that in any circumstances I decline to condone disloyalty in man or woman of my name."

"You cannot mean it, Edmund. You cannot know what it involves. Whatever is to become of her!"

Buffeted by this brutality, her strength was failing. Her voice was growing high and weak.

"I have thought about that," said Broke; "I am about to write to Charles to place her in her old school at Chiswick until she is of age. Until then I will maintain her there, because the law requires it."

"And afterwards?" said the wretched woman, with an eagerness that sprang from an intolerable anguish.

"As far as I am concerned personally there is no afterwards."

"You cannot mean that! Surely you will then consent to receive her again. After she has expiated her offence you will take her back."

"There are offences that nothing can expiate, that nothing can condone. Disloyalty is the first of them. And as you force me to say it, Jane, let me tell you that, if it were possible, the sex makes it the more abominable."

"It is the savage speaking again," said the wretched woman drearily.

"I can bear your taunts," said her husband. "Cowards are often as quick with their tongues as they are with their heels."

Mrs. Broke quivered. His dreadful unreason was unnerving her.

"It is possible even to drive a woman too far, Edmund. I must warn you."

"Ha, poor fool, you threaten me!"

His sneer turned her faithful blood into ice.

"I suppose you are aware," he said, with a brutal absence of vehemence, "that the abettors of the guilty run the danger of being arraigned. You will not be wise to trespass too far on your privileges. I am not a very patient man when I find the very foundations of my house worm-eaten and dry-rotted with treason and disloyalty. I am slow to take up the knife to start cutting, but once having done so you will not find me likely to hesitate. Two pillars I have removed already; do not force me to cut away the centrepiece also."

The wife of thirty years blushed a vivid colour, and recoiled from his words with horror taking her by the heart. A full minute of silence passed, in which the woman of ineffable wisdom and mastery fought passionately for her self-control. After a frantic struggle she recovered it.

"You must please forgive me, Edmund," she said with an utter humility of voice and manner, "if the words I have used have been other than—than you think they ought to have been. Women have not the hardihood of men if you deal them blows over the heart. We are some-

times compelled by nature to cry out a little wildly then, and if you hear us you must not heed what we say."

"I—ah, forgive you," said our hero with an expansive magnanimity.

That was a line generally admired by the critics in the stalls of the Olympian Theatre.

"Will you not consent to receive her again?" said the unhappy woman, immediately relapsing out of the self-control she had with so much difficulty imposed upon herself, now that the voice of her lord sounded once more in her ears as that of the human being in whose bosom she was wont to lie.

Broke had no desire to be harsh with one whom a long and great experience had taught him was as faithful a soul as any in the world. He summoned his habitual tenderness for her.

"My poor, old girl," he said, "why harrow your feelings in this way? You remind me of a person who has a horror of death walking into the Morgue to look at it."

"Are you wholly without bowels, Edmund? Do you never forgive?" Unrestrained nature had expelled expedience, and was driving her furiously again.

"You have lived with me long enough to answer that question for yourself," said Broke, without resentment. She was a woman and a mother after all, poor old girl!

"It begins to seem almost," the unhappy woman went on with a haggard feebleness that perfect sanity would not have allowed her, "that I have been yoked all these years with an ogre, a sort of inhuman monster, and I have not known it. The first I could hardly bear; the second may be too much."

Broke did not look at his wife's face. Also he tried not to listen to her words. It was hardly fair to her to hear them; he had a very chivalrous disposition. For she spoke no longer as the cool and temperate woman of affairs. In such a speech as this there was not a vestige to be recognized of the suavely ordered diction, the mellow candour, the amiable cynicism, the slightly inhuman wisdom of her who so long had preached the world's doctrine of expedience. Indeed, had he been in a mood for laughter, such a melodramatic change in her must have caused him to

indulge in it. Jane in a histrionic vein was somewhat like Machiavelli in a burst of confidence.

However, let others laugh at that spectacle. As a woman and a mother something was her due. And as a man and a father something was as indubitably his. He bled as well as she. It was his fate to be denied a recognition of that fact, but such was the supposed austerity of his sex, that he must suffer that unfairness. Women are known to be unjust. The pangs of maternity may be great, but are there no nerves and blood-vessels in husbands and fathers by which they also can be taught to feel? Had there been no raw wounds gaping in him there might have been a better hope for them both. The same guarantee of a lofty disinterestedness was with him here in the case of his daughter as in that of his son. As it was, his own desperate pangs furnished him with the strength to bear him on his course. From them he derived the vital nervous force to sit down then and there and write a letter of instruction to his brother-in-law. It embodied, with cruel effectualness, the decree he had issued to his wife. If his right hand offended, he struck it off.

He did not show this letter to the child's mother, and she did not ask to see it. Concealing it in the pocket of his coat, he went straight to the stables, procured a horse, rode to Cuttisham, where the nearest post-office was, and posted it with his own hands.

CHAPTER XXXVI

Enter a Messenger from the Courts of Hymen

IF Broke's ideal was loyalty, his instinct at the period he went to wive must have been very sure and remarkable. The writing and posting of this letter taxed to the utmost the sovereign quality in Mrs. Broke. It was a chief glory of her character, and an instance of the divine patience of her sex, that, broken and shattered as she was already by the incident of her son, she did not in the end allow this second manifestation of her husband's disposition to wrench them asunder.

It was a rather heroic devotion. From whatever standpoint a woman may take her outlook on life, she cannot suffer the children of her heart to be cast away without nursing a bitter resentment against the instrument of her distress, even if it happen to be Almighty God. It would have been fatally easy for a smaller nature, with its weakened mental forces, to break away from Broke, and for its own solace repudiate those drastic acts of which as husband and father he had shown himself to be capable. Her instincts cried out to her to denounce and put off the inhuman monster who had trampled under foot her sacred maternity: her character kept her staunch. The same attributes that had enabled her to keep the sinking ship so long afloat came now to her aid in this, the most instant crisis of her life. That indomitable resolution, thrice welded in the harsh furnace of necessity, rendered her strong, when every nerve cried

out that loyalty could no longer be expected, no longer demanded of her.

In abiding passively by this second decree Mrs. Broke saw, as in the case of the first, just one remote gleam of hope. That favourite doctrine, *laissez-faire*, must be invoked, in the hope that as time went on things might follow a less inexorable trend. If Delia re-entered her old school for a year or perhaps two, and atoned for her misconduct by a subsequent exemplary behaviour that had formerly been hers, there was still a hope, however faint, that time, the healer of all wounds, might also assuage the affront to her father's implacable spirit. It was not yet the hour to despair of ever getting her back into the fold. Her knowledge of Broke told her how remote this hope was; but at least the decree against her youngest daughter could not be quite as irrevocable as that against her only son. Delia had rebelled, it was true, but as yet she could not be said to have done anything that put her for ever outside the pale.

During the long week of blood and tears that followed tne sending of the letter the unhappy woman was in the thick of conflict. Morning, afternoon, and evening, and in the long watches of the night, it was a perpetual struggle of tooth and nail, yet in the end she emerged victorious, but very spent and breathless and faint. During that period she saw at least two letters lying unopened in the handwriting of her brother addressed to her husband. Broke did not show them to her, nor subsequently did he allude to their contents. Valiantly she strove to defeat all conjectures concerning them, and by sheer force of will nearly succeeded in so doing.

It was not until nearly a fortnight had passed that the matter entered a new phase. Her brother presented himself in person one afternoon. She noted immediately that his manner was rather more hangdog and querulous than usual. Something appeared to be weighing on his mind. He had the air of one who, having been commissioned to break bad news, is so oppressed with the sense of his responsibility that forthwith he adopts a demeanour calculated to raise extravagant fears. Presently, after drinking two whiskies and sodas, much

chewing of the straw in his mouth, much coarse language, much shiftiness and irresolution, he made a proposal that they should go into another room, as he had something important to tell her.

Mrs. Broke led the way to her sitting-room.

"I'm glad Edmund ain't about," said Lord Bosket, with the air of a criminal, "for I'm not quite sure how he will take it, do you see? I think it will be better for you to break it to him, Jane. You understand his ways more, and know him better than I do."

"What has happened?" said his sister, already oppressed by his circumlocution.

"The little filly was married this mornin'."

Mrs. Broke shuddered a little and laughed a little in the same instant of time.

"What do you mean, Charles? Explain, please."

"She was married this mornin' by special licence to that writing feller; and I've just seen 'em off to Paris for the honeymoon. From Paris they are goin' to the Mediterranean, and then on to Algiers."

The weary bewilderment in the face of Mrs. Broke increased rather than grew less.

"The world moves a little too fast for me just now. I am out of breath with trying to keep pace with it. I—I confess I don't quite know where I am."

"Of course you will say it is all my doing," said Lord Bosket gloomily. "But I couldn't hold that little filly. She took her head right away from the start. Twice I wrote to Edmund after that pretty letter he sent me to tell him that there was not much chance of my bein' able to carry it out, but he didn't trouble to reply. Besides, I don't mind tellin' *you*, Jane, that I didn't mean to carry it out. I thought that letter was the rottenest ever written. I had not the heart to show it to the poor little gell."

Mrs. Broke looked at her brother with a faint tinge of horror in her scarlet face.

"Did you see that letter, Jane?"

"No, Charles, I did not; but I was aware of the contents."

"Oh! Well, my gell, I don't think I should be proud

of knowin' 'em if I were you. You ought to be ashamed of yourselves, both of you, for sendin' a letter like that to a poor little gell at her time of life."

Lord Bosket concluded his observations with a sudden heat.

"I don't mind tellin' you, Jane," he added, "that that letter got me on the raw. I wonder if I would have written a letter like that if I had had nice little fillies of my own."

"Don't, Charles, please," said the unhappy woman, with bowed head. "We suffered great provocation."

"Provocation be damned. Tell her to come back, and promise her a good hidin' when she does come; or fetch her yourself, and see that she gets one; but there is no need to tell the poor little gell that she has ceased to be your daughter. But mind you, Jane, that wasn't you. I'll lay a thousand to five that that was Edmund. I've always said that Edmund can be an awful swine when he likes."

"We were very much upset, Charles, when that letter was written," said his sister weakly. She endeavoured to associate herself with the offending document for her husband's credit. She did not succeed.

"Upset!" said Lord Bosket contemptuously. "Upset! But don't tell me that *you* had a hand in it. You had not, my gell. You could not ha' written that letter, any more than I could myself. It ain't in you. It was Edmund, the ugly brute. I expect he'll be a tearin' lunatic when he hears about this mornin's performance. It's lucky *I've* not got to tell him. But mind you, Jane, I believe it is for the best. The thing was done accordin' to Cocker, mind you. I gave the little filly away myself, and saw 'em off from Victoria afterwards. And they are not goin' to starve. I saw that Porter feller once or twice in the paddock before the event, and everything was settled accordin' to the card."

"Am I to take it from you, Charles, that you aided and abetted them?" said Mrs. Broke in a bewildered tone.

"You can take it from me, my gell, just as you damn

please. I suppose there will be another "Scene in the House" now I've done it, but if I was to say I was sorry I should be lying. It wasn't impulse, mind you; I looked at the matter all ways on, and came to see that the best thing I could do was to give 'em a leg up. Edmund would not have the poor little gell back, and in all my born days I have not seen a pair cut out so pretty for double harness. Nice pair—very. And if I know anything, those two young devils were not goin' to stand any of our nonsense. Talk about fire. I never saw anything to touch 'em! I'll lay a thousand to five they would ha' started bucking if I had tried coercion. Once they were together I don't see what was goin' to hold 'em.

"There was the law," said Mrs. Broke.

"So there was. Funny I didn't think of that. But it makes no odds. You and Edmund and me and all the judges on the bench would not ha' held 'em at the finish. If I know anything of hosses, they are a pair of customers, those two. They would ha' been at home on any course you liked to put 'em. They'd ha' gone over timber and taken the water, they would. From the time I first saw our little tit on that heap of stones, it was a moral that once she had started there would be no gettin' her back again to the post. She would ha' died first. I've seen some rum women in my time, Jane, but never one to touch her. And for that matter I might as well tell you that Edmund could ha' saved himself the trouble of writin' that letter. It was a thousand to five that his little gell would never trouble him again. I thought at first, don't you know, that she was so obstinate because she was done up; but the next mornin', when she had put in a sound night's rest and she got up in her right mind, do you know what she said? I suppose I had better not tell you."

"I should prefer to know, Charles."

"Well, says our little Miss Broke, 'God may forgive him, but I never will!' meanin' her father. It was said in cold blood, mind you. Pretty good, that, for a bit of a thing not out of her teens, and not much bigger than a brown mouse. She was as quiet and soft about it as you please: no tears, no fuss, no nothin'. Somehow,

Jane, that got home on me. A damned rotten thing to say, what? There's a bit of Edmund himself in her."

A look of wan terror had come into the face of Mrs. Broke. There was no need for her brother to strike that analogy; the wife and mother had already struck it for herself.

"Queen Elizabeth," she said, trying a laugh.

Her attempt, however, was such a ghastly performance that it merely served to emphasize the poignant horror in her eyes.

"I'm not sure, Jane," said her brother, "that I would not rather have had that old hag to deal with than little Miss Delia Broke. She's a record. If she made a row and howled a bit, you would know better where you were. But, bless you, she is as demure as a harlot at a christening all the holy time; and the moment you take a look at those eyes of hers, somehow you know you are done. Blood's a rum thing. That little gell puts you in mind of Roman martyrs, and that class of people. Sort of reminds you, don't you know, of Boadicea, Godiva, Joan of Arc, and that crowd. I call her as pretty a bit o' stuff as ever I saw, but I don't crave to have the handlin' of her, thank you. All the same, runaway or no runaway, I shouldn't disown her if I was her papa."

"I suppose, Charles, we ought to be very much indebted to you for the time you have bestowed upon her affairs, and the trouble to which you have been put," said Mrs. Broke, striving to re-assume her armour of suave practical matter-of-fact. It was a difficult process, but the valiant woman got it on somehow. "I am sure, Charles, you have acted for the best. If you had not gone after her so promptly I shudder to think what might have happened to a penniless and distraught creature like that, alone in London."

"I can tell you," said her brother, with grim brevity. "There would ha' been the body of a little gell to identify—found dead on a doorstep in the Charing Cross Road at one in the mornin'."

"I must ask you to spare my feelings, Charles," said his sister, shuddering at this realism.

"You didn't spare that poor little gell's, none of you,"

said Lord Bosket, with a gloomy indignation again appearing in him.

"I should have come to relieve you of the charge of the child immediately," said Mrs. Broke, "had not Edmund proved so unreasonable. And had I come I am afraid I could have done no good. But tell me, Charles, this man, Porter, what opinion did you form of him?"

"I have already given you my opinion of him, my gell."

"Do you not think you might be a little more explicit in—in the light of what has happened?"

"Well, I went to see him at the office of his paper. I daresay you will be interested to know, my gell, that he had still got a tidy-sized mark on his forehead, but that he had had his front teeth put in again. And it didn't take long for me to grant him a licence. A very straightforward, honest, unassuming feller he seemed to be to me, and anxious to run straight. He didn't allude to that little occurrence, naturally; but somehow he had not the air of a man who carries a grievance, and as soon as I saw that, I chalked him up a mark. Give me the feller who can take a good hidin', whether he's deserved it or not."

Mrs. Broke winced.

"And it struck me, Jane, that he had got a mind of his own, had that feller. He said he should stand by her whatever happened now that she had come to him. I gave him another mark for that. Grit, my gell. He said he had no wish to put himself in the wrong in the eyes of the law, but law or no law, he was goin' to stand by her. I must say I liked the style of the feller altogether. Nothin' fussy, nothin' high-falutin', but straight as daylight, and as smart as blazes. I came away with the feelin' that things were pannin' out better than we could have hoped."

"Did he strike you as a gentleman, Charles?"

"Wish I was as good a one," said our friend gloomily.

"I mean, Charles, in a conventional sense."

"He's not one of the haw-haw brigade, if that's what you mean. And I've seen hosses cut prettier in the jib. But he's one to be reckoned with in any com-

pany. I don't remember to have met one so *thorough*. I'd ha' trusted him with one of my own. And, mind you, I went to him right up to the muzzle in prejudice."

"I suppose you know he is the son of a bookseller at Cuttisham?"

"Very creditable to the booksellers of Cuttisham if that is so. If they can produce that sort they are a fine body."

"But, my dear Charles——!"

"There's no 'my dear Charles!' about it. Let every tub stand on its own bottom, I say. When you meet a dam fool, give him the order of the boot; when you meet a wise man, you can kindly remove your hat. And I'll lay a monkey to nothing you'll want a new toe-cap before you've worn out the brim of your Lincoln and Bennett. If I felt myself to be the equal of that feller, I should hold up my head a bit higher than I do at present, I don't mind tellin' you."

"I am a little astonished by the idealist picture you paint of him, my dear Charles."

"No need to be, my gell. I've seen him not once or twice, mind you, but a dozen times. I think I'm a bit of a judge of a hoss, but I never ran over the points of one that had got to carry my racin' colours like I did his. One of your solid sort, who are all *bone* and *brain* and *guts*. You don't think, Jane, do you, that I should ha' handed our little gell to a feller that I wouldn't back to my last 'lord o' the manor'?"

"I do not, Charles. I do you that justice."

"Very good of you, I'm sure. But, in my opinion, they will be about the best mated pair in England. They are made for one another, you might say, like a cup and saucer. In my judgment, that little filly of ours wants a man of that sort, or none. A common feller, with no mind and no character, would not do for her."

"And he can afford to maintain her, Charles?"

"He has fourteen hundred a year of his own, roughly speaking, and I hear he is a risin' man. His chief tells me that before long the world is goin' to hear from him. In the meantime I have fixed another five hundred a year on the little filly myself, just to keep 'em from starvin'.

I knew Edmund couldn't, and if he could he wouldn't."

Mrs. Broke was touched by this concrete example of her brother's goodness of heart.

"I don't know how we can thank you, Charles, for all you have done," she said humbly. "You have always been the truest friend we have had. There seems no end to your kindnesses."

"Tut, tut," said her brother, with a slight display of uneasiness, "no need to go into trifles. It is no more than anybody else would ha' done in the circumstances. They might ha' stopped short of the ceremony, I daresay they would; but let folks say what they like, I am convinced it will turn out sound."

Lord Bosket rose to go. As he was taking his departure he encountered Broke, who was coming across the hall. Their usual informal greetings were exchanged. It then struck Lord Bosket with surprise that his brother-in-law refrained from alluding to the subject which had dominated his own thoughts for a fortnight past. So great was his relief at thus providentially finding himself in a position to avoid this topic, that, on his own part, he studiously refrained from making a reference to it. All the same, it was very singular that Edmund should omit to speak of it in any way. However, as Lord Bosket proceeded to pass out at the door, he turned back to say over his shoulder—

"By the way, Edmund, you had better go and have a word with Jane. She has got something to tell you."

Delia's cunning uncle then disappeared through the door hastily, lest her father should recall him to explain what the something was.

Broke did not go to his wife there and then. He had no doubt the matter could wait until he had laid his mind at rest on a point in turnips which he had pledged himself to look up in a back number of the *Field*. Having convinced himself after researches lasting nearly an hour that the *Field* of the year before last said just what he thought it did say, although he had not been absolutely sure, he went to ask his wife what she wanted.

When he confronted her he was rather surprised by the amount of emotion that was for once reflected in her

impassive face. It would have been hard to find an obtuser person than he, but the change that had been taking place in her recently could not escape even his perfunctory eyes.

"Charles said you had something to tell me."

"I wanted to tell you that Delia married that man this morning."

She made her announcement without an instant of preface.

He received it with the blankest indifference. The news elicited no spark of recognition.

His wife could hardly dissemble her astonishment. She had looked for a repetition of some kind at least of the somewhat distressing scene that followed a similar announcement in the case of Billy. But Broke stood stolid and impregnable. He paid no more heed than if he had not heard a word she said. Her immediate feeling was that of relief, although even as it regaled her there was the consciousness that his attitude was uncanny.

"I hope, Edmund," she said anxiously, nervously, "that you view it in the same light I do myself. I believe it to be rather providential. The child has made a hopeless mess of her life, but I am not sure that when all is said she has not patched it up as well as could be expected. Charles quite thinks so. Indeed, he has helped rather actively to bring it about. The man has earned his entire confidence, and I think, Edmund, we must allow that Charles, with all his foibles, is quite a shrewd judge of character. Charles has behaved most handsomely. He has given the child five hundred a year for herself; and the man, I understand, has fourteen hundred a year of his own, and excellent prospects."

Broke stood immovable as granite. Deliberately he was not hearing a word she was uttering. He suppressed a yawn with his hand. Mrs. Broke having lost her initial sense of relief, was now afflicted severely with this attitude. She would almost have preferred a scene.

"I hope you recognize, Edmund," she said, with a strange solicitude, "how essential all this is to the welfare of the child."

"On the contrary," said Broke, "I recognize nothing

of the matter. It does not interest me. It was closed a fortnight ago, and in any circumstances it cannot be re-opened."

"But, Edmund——"

Broke cut her down with his hand.

"I shall be glad, Jane, when you bring yourself to feel that that is the case. It is futile, a waste of our time, for you to attempt to re-open a subject that is closed once and for all."

"But, Edmund——!"

"Is this all you wish to speak to me about?"

"It is," said his wife. She was cut to the heart.

Broke sauntered out of the room in the leisurely manner in which he had entered it.

CHAPTER XXXVII

The Lady Bosket at Home

ON quitting his sister, Lord Bosket went to his country seat, some five miles from Covenden. He had been absent a fortnight; and leaving London that morning he had gone direct to the distressed family of Covenden. The man and the clothes he had telegraphed for after his unpremeditated excursion to town had been sent on in advance. No sooner did he arrive at Hipsley in his own person that afternoon, than the butler greeted him.

"Her ladyship told me to say, my lord, that she wished to see you the moment you returned. She is in her study, my lord."

In the impassive person who made this announcement, Lord Bosket's grunt did not cause an inch of eyebrow to be displaced. Nor did his long-drawn whistle produce a visible emotion in that implicit breast.

"How's her plumage, Paling?"

"Standing up, my lord."

"What ho! You had better get me a whisky-and-soda, then, before I go and face the music."

A little afterwards, reinforced by this elixir, Lord Bosket betook himself to the study of the gifted lady. She was discovered seated in a revolving chair before a desk, writing copiously on blue foolscap with a feathered quill. At a side table, a sort of annexe to the Mount Parnassus where sat the child of the gods, the daughter of the Muses, was seated a second lady severe of years, of aspect also, a spinster by force of circumstances, and a typewriter by inclination tempered with necessity. She was in the pursuit of her calling even now. A Remington machine

was clucking out into a fair copy the pellucid lines of *Love Eclectic: a Sonnet Cycle*, immediately antecedent to its being given to the slow-breathing peoples of the earth in nine monthly magazines at once, by special arrangement, and countless baser newspapers; afterwards to be born again, like a second Peleus, in the buckram and large paper of the higher grove of the birds of song.

The utterer of these winged words, whose destiny it was to cleave the airs of our time with fragrance, having concluded this important contribution to the heritage of man, was now engaged in writing a short essay, ycleped *An Inquiry into the Decay of Feeling*. Its avowed purpose was to keep a light burning in these dark days of Brutality and Mammon. The literary ideal it set before itself was to mingle the culture of Old Greece with the human simplicity of the New Testament. It had already achieved the feat of exciting a substantial cheque on account from the syndicate which had purchased the serial rights before a line had been written.

Beside the elbow of the gifted lady was a feminine periodical written exclusively by Peeresses for the perusal of Ladies who had been presented at Court, and Gentlewomen of the Upper Middle Classes. On the cover was the picture of a Crowned Head in colours. The Crown had been reproduced with a fidelity never attempted before. By a triumph of lithography, every stone in it received its value, and shone with the greatest authenticity. A free copy of the magazine had been graciously accepted by the Crowned Head in question. And so lavish were its proprietors in the lures with which they ravished the eyes of the public, that, as if this fact was not enough in itself to exhaust the first edition on the day of publication, there was displayed on the top of the cover, in a type sufficiently bold to cause the hesitating purchaser instantly to resolve her doubts, the legend: "The Lady Bosket at Home, by One who Knows Her, page 340."

A reference to the page in question set forth, under the general title of "*Illustrated Interview* No 12," many surprising and memorable details of the home life of the writer of *Poses in the Opaque*. Not only was she the first poetess and authoress of her time from the point of view of an

unimpeachable distinction, but it was also her privilege to sit in the peeresses' Gallery of the House of Lords. To be sure, there had been others, but, incredible as it might appear, even wearers of the strawberry leaf were not endowed so unmistakably with the authentic thrill as the Lady Bosket. The husband of the gifted lady, said our enthusiastic periodical, was also a gentleman of exemplary life and the highest culture, widely known and deeply respected, even by Royalty Itself, a generous patron of the Turf, a member of the Jockey Club, and a popular and accomplished Master of Hounds.

It appeared that in the singularly beautiful home-life of this great and good lady her humility was in a nice proportion to her gifts. Her tastes were as simple as they were refined. She had a predilection for blue china and black letter, white muslin and green tea. It was a popular fallacy to suppose that that exquisite utterance, "Home is the woman's sphere," was out of the *Poses*, in the same way that it was to suppose that "God tempers the wind to the shorn lamb" was out of the Bible; but it belonged to her in a higher and more special sense, because of the serene and unfailing manner in which she sustained the domestic character. She had made it her own. The sacredness of the home was so immune in her keeping, that in the time to come the beautiful phrase quoted above must become irrevocably identified with her name. It was the very marrow of her writings, the true inwardness of her teaching. It was the sacred fount, the well-spring, whence gushed the pure solace of many a humble hearth.

As befitted the transcendent genius of one "who had become a classic in her own life-time"—the phrase is that of one of the weekly journals of critical and literary opinion whose privilege it was to extol her works—the definitive edition of the collected writings of Emma, Lady Bosket, the Hipsley edition of the publishers' announcements, stood on the side table in twelve majestic tomes. On the virgin front of each was stamped a monogram and crest. Within was a full-length photogravure of the gifted lady, in the coronet and ermine robe worn by peeresses on the occasions of an organized display. Each volume was further equipped with an introduction from the pen of a purveyor

of prefaces to the new editions of the classic authors. There was also an additional volume uniform with the above, *An Appreciation*, by a foremost person of the other sex. This edition in large paper was limited to two hundred and fifty copies, each of which bore the autograph of the authoress; and it was understood that when that number had been subscribed, the type would be distributed. Beside them was laid reverently the *Standard* newspaper of that day.

Lady Bosket had exchanged the glasses of public life, for the gold pince-nez of the study. Upon the appearance of our friend she resolutely rounded the period on which she was engaged, and then swung round audibly in her revolving chair to confront him.

"Be so good as to leave us, Mottrom," she said in her most imperious key.

The thirteenth daughter of a country clergyman who had been manipulating the typewriter carried the machine and *Love Eclectic: a Sonnet Cycle* into an adjoining room. She was paid by the hour; and neither her lofty ideal of diligence, nor that of her employer permitted her to waste a moment of her time. When our friend had closed the door upon her, Lady Bosket glared upon him stonily through her pince-nez. Less accustomed to their use on active service, she then discarded them in favour of the more familiar weapon.

"So you have condescended to come."

"Oh yes," said our friend, affecting a meek and uneasy lightness of tone.

"Have you any objection to informing me where you have been during the past fortnight?"

"Town."

"That is a lie, Charles."

The delicately cut nostril quivered. The whirr of intellectual feathers could be faintly heard.

"Beg pardon," said our friend humbly.

The uncompromising statement was repeated incisively.

"I knew you'd say that," he said, more humbly than ever. "But it is God's truth."

"I must ask you, Charles, not to indulge in a profane vehemence. For the third time I say it is a lie. You

have not slept once at Grosvenor Street during the last fortnight."

" No, I have been stayin' at an hotel."

" Wha-a-a-t!" The voice of Lady Bosket ascended to a scream. " You have the effrontery to tell me that to my face. What do you mean by staying at an hotel when there is your own house to go to? There is only one construction to be placed on such an act; and, Charles, knowing you as I do, I do not hesitate to place it upon it."

Our friend was dumb before her splendid scorn of him. The silver hair shook about the intellectual temples. The high voice rose higher, to a wail " like the winds of March among the forest trees" (*Love Eclectic XIX*).

" Thoroughly debased and abandoned as you are," said Lady Bosket, stimulated to superior flights by the inoffensiveness of this wretched groveller, " such a behaviour cannot have an iota of effect upon your reputation or your character. But with me, I thank Heaven, it is not so. It matters very grievously to me. In justice to many thousands of my fellow-countrymen and fellow-countrywomen, it behoves me to be jealous of the name I bear. I must be watchful, Charles, that it shall not be tarnished by the breath of suspicion. Do you suppose that the work to which I have dedicated my life: the leavening of the lives of the people of this land, and several others, the conduct of them through the slough of gross and sensual darkness along the paths of culture into the blaze and the ultimate glory of light—do you suppose, Charles, that such aims as these are to be prejudiced and retarded, and even rendered impotent, by the irresponsible acts of the coarse ruffian who bears my name?"

Lord Bosket kept his hands in his pockets throughout this oration, and might have been heard to be whistling softly to himself in those intervals which punctuated each surpassing period, wherein the speaker paused to take a little breath to enter upon the next.

" You are wrong for once," he said dismally, when she had rounded the last one successfully.

The cringing posture adopted by this worm among mankind imbued the poetess with a more heroic fury.

"I am wrong, am I! Well, let me remind you that, when you were last from home, the private detective it is my custom to employ reported, Charles, that on three occasions you were traced to the house of an actress in St. John's Wood."

"I only went to take her a bunch of roses, and drink a cup of tea. No harm in that."

"Man, do not have the effrontery to defend yourself. Your very existence is an offence. The only excuse that I have allowed myself for tolerating it so long has been the hope, the slender hope, that force of example would bring about your reform. But now I see more clearly than ever that you are a lost soul. I lose heart, Charles, I lose heart. A very little more, Charles, and, cost what it may to wash our soiled linen in public, I shall obtain peace of mind at the price of self-respect and proceed to do so."

"How much more?" Our friend's eagerness was pathetic.

"I do not choose to tell you," said his lady, nipping in the bud the tender, pious hope. "I am aware that in the extreme condition into which your courses have led you, the withdrawal of any higher influence would be hailed as a relief. But do not flatter yourself unduly. I do not propose as yet to abandon you to the mire. You are an offence, Charles, you nauseate; but I will continue to suffer even physical repulsion for the sake of your eternal soul."

To-day the gifted lady felt herself to be in fine form. She had at least two pretexts on which she could exercise the highest functions of her talent. It was not always she had one. But to-day there was no need to make bricks without straw; the prodigality of her grievances was a little intoxicating.

In the meantime, our friend sighed. He had ceased to marvel at his own patience long ago. He had come to acquiesce in it as the hypochondriac acquiesces in his incurable disease.

"This, however, is not the matter I wished to discuss," said our agreeable woman of genius, gathering her forces for a still happier excursion. For, after all, that particular theme was too stale, too outworn to afford any pleasure,

beyond the opportunity it provided to display her technique, rather in the fashion that your poet submits to the cumbersome restrictions of rhyme. But the one she was now approaching was so novel that it had been purposely withheld that she might indulge in an anticipation of the delights it would afford.

"Charles, I must ask you to be good enough to read this. Had I not been so busy with my important work I should have felt it my duty to see Jane and Edmund personally. Indeed, before luncheon I sent for Jane, but at present she has not thought fit to come. Still, I am inclined to believe the whole thing is a horrible mistake. A painful experience teaches one that compositors are so careless; although, to be sure, the *Standard* is usually so very correct."

As she spoke, Lady Bosket picked up that pillar of the Constitution reclining cheek by jowl with the Hipsley edition of her works. She placed her finger on an announcement of marriage on the front page, and ordered her husband to peruse it. He read: "Porter—Broke. On the 16th inst., at St. Remigius', South Kensington, by the Rev. Canon J. G. Pryse-Johnson, M.A., Vicar, Alfred, eldest son of Joseph Porter, Cuttisham, Parks, to Delia Mary, youngest daughter of E. W. A. C. B. Broke, Esq., J.P., D.L., 3 Broke Street, St. James's, S.W.; and Covenden, Cuttisham, Parks.

Lady Bosket scrutinised eagerly the face of our friend while he read this literary achievement with something of the indescribable feelings of an author who for the first time sees himself in the fierce glamour of print.

"It is impossible," she said, "It cannot be true, and yet it is alarmingly circumstantial. And the *Standard* is so correct as a rule. I must write to the editor, and make him apologise. If any one has put a vulgar hoax upon the *Standard*, I am sure it will do its utmost to bring the perpetrator to justice."

"It don't look so bad in print after all," said the author with a fine oblivion of everything but the vanity inseparable from his condition. "The Vicar and I fixed up that little account ourselves, and it will be in all the London papers this mornin'. The Vicar wanted to put in niece of

me and you—these parson fellers are tremendous sticklers for handles and that sort of rot—but I said no. It would not be fair to the little gell to have her saddled with an uncle like me in a public newspaper. Might go against her future. And I happen to know, missis, that neither of em' was very keen on you. But still, that account looks very well. And I see that they have spelt the "Pryse" right; the poor Vicar was fairly tremblin' that they would spell it "P–r–i–c–e."

At this point the joint-author was stopped imperiously, by the high priestess of his craft.

"Stop, Charles! What talk is this? What do you mean? I do not believe you are sober, Charles?"

"Sober as a judge," said Lord Bosket earnestly. "I know what I'm sayin'. I thought it best to do the thing accordin' to Cocker or not at all. Now, honour bright, missis, as a judge of literature, don't you think that that little account looks very well in print?"

"If you are not drunk, Charles, you must be mad. What does it all mean? *Will* you have the goodness to explain?"

Our friend was not permitted to proceed very far in his remarkable, but not particularly lucid statement, before he was stopped again.

"Will you have the goodness to speak slowly and distinctly, Charles? And have the goodness to employ as little licence in your speech as possible. A little more chastity and purity of expression one would welcome as an aid to one's intelligence. As I have before had occasion to remind you, the word 'filly' is intended to signify a young female horse, not a young female human being. Your low stable phraseology is not only disagreeable, it is offensive."

Lord Bosket continued his narration as best he could under these hampering restrictions. Long before the end of it Lady Bosket was taken aback too completely to be able to impose any further checks upon his mode of expression.

"It is too much," she cried. "One's reason staggers. What was everybody about? What were her parents about? And you, Charles? And the child herself? And what were the police doing? Besides, no man in his senses

would ever dare. The man must be mad. You all must be mad! No; I will not, I cannot believe it."

She ended on a sob of angry pain, which gave her so much pleasure that it might have been real. Our friend, who was perhaps the tenderest-hearted man in the world—at least those who knew him best were firm in that belief—was touched by such a poignant distress. He had the intrepidity to seek to lessen it.

"No need to take on about it, missis. It's all for the best, I'm certain. Edmund said he wouldn't have her back; and she said she wouldn't go back, and meant it too. She might ha' gone much farther and fared a damn sight worse. Lucky little filly to get a feller like that; though, mind you, he's lucky too. She's a fine little gell."

"Charles, how dare you! Have you the effrontery to stand there and tell me you are proud of your work?"

"I ain't ashamed of it, missis," said our friend in a meek voice. "I am damned if I am. If the same thing happened to-morrow I should do it again. If ever two beggars were made for one another in this world those were the two."

"Foh! you disgust me. Your habits have utterly destroyed any little sense of decency you may have once possessed. Can you be aware that this man—I will not soil my lips with his name—is from behind the counter of a bookseller's shop in Cuttisham."

"Devilish lucky counter to keep a man like that behind it, as I said to Jane." For the first time in this interview our friend evinced a spark of spirit. Attacks on his personal character he had acquired the habit of accepting as a matter of course, as in accordance with his merit; but in the cause of a second person, of one who had won his confidence, he could be valiant. "Missis, what I say is this, if they have got any more of that sort hidin' behind the counters in the Cuttisham shops, the sooner they come from behind em' the better. The country will be none the worse for that sort. I'd back that feller to any amount. If I'd got a little filly of my own, which I haven't and never shall have, I'd trust that feller with her."

"Man, you forget yourself!"

"Wish I could," said the man drearily.

The voice of our heroic lady had risen higher and higher at these audacious speeches. Whenever her poor worm of a husband showed a tendency to stand up for others, he was acting on a principle that she did not understand. For him to exhibit it at this of all seasons was maddening. Again and again could her plumage be heard to whirr like that of a covey of startled partridges. The patrician features quivered, and were seen to grow distorted into shapes that almost as by a miracle remained outside the border-line of the plebeian. The forehead, that citadel of intellectual nobility, lost its serene appearance, but yet it was not sufficiently twisted to crack the enamel that covered it. The regal nose was uptossed and snuffed the air, but not in sufficient quantities to provoke an undignified desire to sneeze. Her glasses almost forgot to be self-conscious, and shook in her hand in a sublime agitation, which yet contrived to enable her to round her periods with strenuous magniloquence as became the author of the "Poses."

"He is out of a bookseller's shop in Cuttisham," she shrieked. "And you not only countenance this immoral marriage, but you aid, you abet, you defend it. Have you no sense of propriety, of decency, of the fitness of things? Have you no fragment left of your self-respect. Answer me, man. Were you drunk when you did it?"

"No," said the man quietly.

"I suppose there is a law in the land by which it can be set aside, and the man can be imprisoned with hard labour. What are Jane and Edmund doing? Answer me that. Have they communicated with the police?"

"No; but they damn near had to. If I hadn't happened to meet old Pearce that afternoon, they'd ha' been wanted at the mortuary to identify the body of a little gell."

"Would that they had been, rather than she should have cast this indelible disgrace upon her name."

"If I were you, missis, I wouldn't let anybody hear me say that."

"Don't dare to talk to me, man. What is Edmund doing?"

"If you read the letter he wrote to me when she went away, you wouldn't ask. He washed his hands of her at

the start. He behaved like the swine that he can be, did Edmund, I don't mind tellin' you."

"A very right and proper course for Edmund to take. He at least appears not quite to have lost his head. I shall make it my duty to find a law in the land to punish them both. The incredible effrontery of a man I chose myself, a man who owed nearly everything to my interest, that he should turn round and bite the hand that fostered him! I know not whether the more to deplore his wickedness or his black ingratitude."

Lord Bosket gave his shoulders a whimsical shrug.

"The man must be lost to all sense of shame. And as for that child, she is so abandoned that I have no words in which to express what I think of her. It is intolerable, it is a gross outrage against our higher human instincts that one of her years should wantonly bring degradation on herself and worse than degradation on her family."

At this point Lord Bosket actually had the temerity to shake his head, as though he ventured to dissent from the views set forth with so much power and finish. He took confidence from the fact that these great guns were no longer trained against himself.

"Here, steady on," he suddenly interjected into the middle of a particularly choice tirade. In a flash was he turned upon and rent.

"You deny me the right to express my opinion, Charles," she cried, "like the wind in the gables groaning" (*Love Eclectic XXXV*). "But I will express it. Do you expect me to be browbeaten by such a coarse bully as you? I despise you for what you are. The child is my niece, would that she were not, and whatever I choose to think of her I will say. If the inadequacy of your sense of shame permits you deliberately to help her on her downward path, do you suppose I will condone her or you? I might have been aware that the moment she fell into your clutches she would be ruined."

"Steady on," said Lord Bosket.

An odd look had come in him suddenly.

"Do you suppose, Charles, that so coarse a ruffian as yourself shall make me insensible to the conduct of one so shameless and abandoned?"

"Steady on, missis," said our friend. "Stick to me; my back's broad; and I daresay I deserve all I get. But leave that little gell alone, d'ye hear. Nobody's goin' to say a word against that little filly before me."

"Oh, indeed, Charles. I shall say exactly what I choose of the little filly, as you term her so elegantly." The sagacious lady saw where the shoe pinched. She wanted to inflict pain; and in the pleasure of the discovery of the vulnerable heel of this besotted Achilles, against whom her shafts were directed in vain as a rule, she was inclined to exult. She had found a sure means at last of gratifying her appetite.

In the meantime the uneasiness of our friend's air and manner was become more visible. His customary stolid, dogged, querulous look was giving way to something else. His face approximated a shade nearer to the colour of the tomato, if such a feat in aestheticism were possible. Something remarkable was showing in his furtive and uneasy eye. He began to waddle up and down the carpet in his agitation, a course that the very keenest of his lady's barbs had failed to incite him to adopt before. Nor was she slow to observe this salutary effect upon her brutalised and dull-witted sot of a husband. It induced her to spread her pinions wider in the rapt empyrean. She went to higher flights.

Suddenly our friend stopped in his eccentric waddle, and bent his head towards her with a humble, perplexed attention.

"What was that you said, missis? I didn't quite catch it."

The authoress repeated the phrase syllable by syllable with blistering unction.

There was a pause while our friend strove to instil its meaning into his torpid understanding. He was then seen to make a great effort to pull himself together. Still exhibiting many tokens of an intense mental struggle, our friend made a careful selection of his words, and proceeded to utter them with a precision that one would hardly have given him the credit of being able to employ.

"Look you here, my good woman," he said, and his

fingers and face were twitching violently. "Neither you nor anybody else is goin' to speak of that little gell like that before me. You mark it, my good woman; I'm not goin' to stand it, d'ye see?"

"So you choose to be impertinent, Charles," said the intrepid lady, not scenting the danger that she ran. "This is a new development. You coarse bully and ruffian, I shall speak of her in what terms I choose."

"Oh, you will!" said our friend, in a gloomy and pensive manner, which yet left no margin for misconstruction. "Now, missis, look you here, if you ain't civil I shall have to smack you."

Lady Bosket paused with open mouth to gasp for breath. And well she might. Such a blasphemous speech had frozen the blood in those intellectual veins. The new darts on her tongue refused to be shot forth. The degraded worm she called husband was here in a new rôle indeed. Never before had she seen him look thus. And as for hearing him speak in that way, never, never had those chaste ears been so defiled. The man must be drinking himself mad. The flaccid, meek thing, whose name she had borne all these years, on whose devoted person she had been able to wreak her talents to her heart's content, because of the immunity conferred by his sheeplike character, had, for the first time, given place to the more hideous guise in which her romantic fancy had delighted to clothe him that her heroic assaults might have a reason to be.

Often enough she had called him a wolf, when in her heart she had known him to be only a lamb. If for a moment she had thought he really might be a wolf, she would have known better than to make so free with the opprobrious name. Had there seemed a remote chance of being torn by such a terrible animal nothing would have induced her to incur the risk. Physical courage and a high intellectual development do not always run in double harness. No sooner was it borne in upon this lady of a hyper-eminent culture that the brute and the ruffian meant what he said than her flag went down.

It was only for an instant, however, in the first shock of disillusion. Habit is as powerful as nature. So long

had she been accustomed to wield the rod of an unquestioned ascendancy over him, that at once to acquiesce in this new order of things was impossible. The beast might bluster; but it was not reasonable to suppose that such a sheep could stand revealed after all these years as anything more fierce. He was no wolf however, he might bark and growl and masquerade in grey fur. She would soon tear that inane garment off him and expose the childish deception. It was only Charles.

With the accession of this second and more comfortable thought, our gifted lady raised her glasses slowly and majestically and went with a splendid deliberation to a doom that was invested with something of pathos by the complete unconsciousness in which she was clad as she embraced it.

"Charles, I regret to find that you are under the influence of drink. But you are not to suppose that your *Hooliganism* will divorce me from a sense of my duty in this case. Every word I have uttered in regard to that abandoned *creature* I am prepared to re-affirm. She is as great a disgrace to her sex as you are to yours."

"Very good," said our friend, "now you get a damned good hidin'."

Before the astounded lady could realise what was taking place, the sheep under the wolfskin had made a grab at her desk, and seized the manuscript of the *Inquiry into the Decay of Feeling*, had torn it into a hundred pieces and distributed them all over the carpet. His next act was to turn to the side table, and at one fell swoop to knock off the entire Hipsley Edition of her Collected Works. For quite a minute he played football with these chaste volumes about a room that was overburdened with rare articles of furniture. The volume containing the imperishable "Poses" themselves he kicked through the very centre of a magnificent mirror in occupation of the mantelpiece, whereon it fell from its full height and was dashed in a thousand fragments on the tiles of the hearth. Many articles of priceless old china, Sèvres vases, and wonderful cameos came to destruction on those same relentless tiles. He then turned his attention to an old cabinet, beautiful and rare, that stood in a corner, overturned it completely,

and in the process innumerable knick-knacks, souvenirs from admirers in all quarters of the world, and many objects of vertu suffered damage of an irreparable nature. Not here, however, did the *débâcle* end. The sheep under the wolfskin was further inflamed by the sight of a full-length oil-painting by a Royal Academician of the authoress of the "Poses" in a coronet and robe, which hung in a massive gilt frame on the wall opposite that noble ruined mirror, wherein the subject of this free adaptation of her patrician features was wont to gaze, to enjoy the pleasure of contemplating herself from the several points of view of the ideal and the real at one and at the same time. This rococo performance was plucked from its place of honour and hurled with a reverberating crash through the middle of a stained glass window, designed by a second alumnus of Burlington House, into the conservatory behind.

The sheep under the wolfskin then turned his attention to the authoress of *Poses in the Opaque*. She was discovered to be cowering in a corner of the room, trembling with terror. She was too frightened to cry out. So little was she fitted by nature to cope with crises of this kind, that at this moment she could neither think, act, nor utter any sort of vocal protest whatever. Her glasses had fallen to the ground, and had already been trampled out of recognition under the hoofs of the monster.

"Now then, missis," said our friend, still in the gloomy and pensive manner in which he had wrecked the room. "*You've* got to have it. Come out o' that."

He took our gifted lady by the hair and proceeded to drag her out of her refuge. In the act the major portion of it, in the form of a toupée, came away in his hand. He then administered a smack with his open palm, not on the authentic part, but on one side of the head, and then one on the other, not very hard, but rather in the pensive and disinterested manner that he would have bestowed a similar correction on a puppy who had been guilty of a misdemeanour.

"Damn it, missis, you deserve a lot more than that," he said, thoughtfully, after this discipline had been administered.

But as the humane reader will not need to be told, the

cultivated creature suffered intensely. The first of these rather formal and perfunctory strokes shook her to the centre of her intellectual being; at the second she sank to her knees among the débris, and proceeded in abject terror to swoon at the feet of her lord.

By the time the horrified clergyman's daughter in the next room had summoned the necessary degree of courage to invade the riot, it was an extraordinary scene that rewarded her hardihood. The temple of the Muses had suffered earthquake and eclipse; but that was not the most memorable part of the spectacle provided for her. The husband of "the most distinguished woman of our time" was seen to be supporting his fainting lady on his knee. He was fondling her hands and addressing terms of endearment to her, while she, poor soul, lay in his arms panting, and sobbing, and clinging to them, with a face dissolved in tears.

"Dry your eyes, missis," he was saying in tender accents. "Be a good old missis in the future, and it sha'n't happen to you any more. You are not hurt, you know; I hardly touched you. If you had had your rights, you know, you would ha' got a lot more than that. But a kiss now, missis, and we will call the account square. Dry your eyes, poor old thing. Miss Mottrom, ring the bell, and we will get the poor old gell a cup of tea. She's a bit upset."

"N-n-no," moaned the tearful lady. "D-do not ring Mottrom. I—I am not fit to be seen in this state. N-nobody must know of what has happened. It would be too scandalous. I—I shall be recovered presently."

We must leave the tearful lady to recover by degrees in the tender and affectionate arms of her lord, who in the meantime is diligently bathing her temples in eau de cologne.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

In which Mr. Breffit the Younger puts a Hyphen to his Name

IT was in the middle of August that the arrangement was made by which Harriet was to be given in marriage to John Henry Clapham Raynes, tenth Duke of Wimbledon. Broke's opposition was instinctive rather than reasonable, tacit rather than expressed. There were points where expedience merged itself into duty. The match could never have the sanction of his heart, but in the present state of his affairs it might contribute in a substantial sense to their well-being as a family. And it was the first doctrine he held, the one to which he clung with a tenacity that made it sacred, the one to which the long line of his name had clung before him, that each individual member of the clan to which they had the honour to belong must sink their personal interests, their private desires in the common weal of that splendid institution.

In a sense this proposed marriage also went against the humane judgment of Mrs. Broke. But necessity did much to soften her scruples. The child would be provided for for life, in a sufficiently handsome manner; and at whatever cost to the child herself, here was a consideration that must be allowed to stand foremost. They were all going to beggary together. It would be little less than a crime to cast away any additional chance of keeping a roof over their heads. In the matter of young Breffit this austere practical wisdom

made her almost equally insistent. In that case, however, Broke's prejudices were not to be overborne. Even Expedience was powerless before them.

Harriet was selected after the arrangement itself had been made. The duke was given carte blanche. He had only five to choose from, it was true, now that Delia was no longer included in the fold. But the noble suitor evinced no bias in favour of any particular one. One was as good as another in his impartial view. It savoured of an act of supererogation invidiously to select. One and all were equally healthy, equally homely. Was it not almost too much to ask that from among such a wealth of material he should make up his mind and choose for himself? In the end, finding the task of selection to be beyond his powers, he invoked the aid of the president of their destinies.

"My dear friend," he asked huskily, "which would you recommend? They all appear so worthy, but I cannot take five, can I?"

"Not in civilized England, my dear Harry. Have you not, may I ask, a slight predilection in favour of any particular one?"

"No, alas!"

"Surely one among them is able to impose her personality upon you in some slight peculiar way."

"No, indeed."

"How extravagantly unimpressionable, my poor dear boy! Cannot you concede something to the feelings of a mother?"

"They are all so much alike," he said plaintively.

"Can you not distinguish between their hair, or their eyes, or their height, my dear Harry? Surely the contour of one amongst so many must have established some slight sense of precedence in your mind. Shut your eyes, my dear boy, and try to summon one."

"If I shut my eyes they do not come at all. My dear friend, I implore you to make a suggestion. The first name you give I will accept."

Mrs. Broke laughed smoothly.

"But surely, surely the suggestion should come from you. We women, you know, are so sentimental in these

matters. We are ever seeking to pluck the dragon's tooth of sentiment out of our garden, but it seems hopeless to destroy the horrid crop of fetishes that has been borne upon it. Sex is a strange thing; ours, my dear Harry, will insist even at this time of day upon investing the institution of matrimony with a certain amount of emotion. You are acquainted with their names. Observe the proprieties by uttering one yourself, as haphazard as you please, and she is yours."

It was the duke's turn to laugh now. He did, with a wheeziness that robbed the act of its spontaneity. But the baffling nature of the matter was expressed by a mild light of humour in his face. Still, there was also his grand hereditary anxiety to observe the proprieties.

"One wants to do the right thing, you know; one must always do the right thing, musn't one? I would wish to avoid the conviction that the selection is arbitrary. Surely, my dear friend, as their mother, you can establish a claim for one of them, by suggesting some little point of priority."

"In the matter of good looks, my dear Harry, I do not think there is a pin to choose between them. They are all equally distinguished by their absence. If we were at the trouble to survey the area of their noses I am sure they would all be found to be of equal dimension. In the colour of their eyes, their height, the hue of their skins they do not differ. If we were at the trouble to count the number of hairs that adorn their heads, I do not doubt that they would be found to tally to a unit. There are their ages, of course. Fortunately they were not all born on the same day."

"But I confess it does not seem quite the right thing to make that distinction. I might take the eldest, or I might take the youngest, but is not that just the contingency that a sensitive person like myself would wish to avoid? I would like to find a more adequate reason for imposing captivity upon the eldest beyond the fact that she was the first to enter the world. I should take comfort from such a reason if it could be found. I should not like to feel that the disabilities of the first-born, under which I labour myself, had been invested at my hands with an additional gravity."

"Your scruples do you honour, my dear Harry, but in this case I confess they are uncomfortable."

"I feel that I must do the right thing. Ha! I have an expedient. Suppose we place the names of the sacred five in a hat, and draw out one? Their chances of escape will then be equal; and our choice will also be dignified, as it were, with the official sanction of Providence."

"Is not your ingenuity a little grotesque? I am sure it is calculated to strike a death-blow to the sentiment of the feminine heart; but I am afraid I can suggest no more poetic remedy."

It was by this process of selection that Harriet became the favoured nymph.

"Ah—Harriet is her name I see," said the noble valetudinarian, unfolding the slip of paper he had picked out wearily—the young-old man was quite worn out by the mental strain involved by these anxieties. "I like her name. I once had an old nurse whose name was Harriet, the kindest old soul I ever knew. Why did I not think of *her?* She would have resolved at once our sentimental difficulty."

"Fortunately the inspiration does not come too late," said Mrs. Broke with her mild laugh. "Chance having decreed in Harriet's favour, the choice can still have the cachet of your tender regard for your old nurse. The dear, devoted old thing! I declare I have fallen in love myself with her fragrant memory. The associations clinging about her name must be ever incomparably tender. If you will kindly ring the bell, Harry, you shall see the bride-elect."

"Not to-day, I think, if you please," said Harry. "I fear I have gone through too much already. I cannot stand excitement now."

"I would like the child to make your acquaintance under these conditions, my dear Harry, if you do not mind. I cannot help thinking it would be wise for her to see you at your worst, my poor dear boy. So wonderfully and fearfully are we women put together, that I believe she would be the more sensible of your appeal. The more fragile the flower the more we cherish it. I confess, Harry, that it is against my preconceived opinions for matrimony

to be graced at the altar by the sacred flame of love; but in the case of your nuptials, my poor dear boy, I am prepared cheerfully to waive them. Indeed, in the special circumstances I am woman enough to hanker after something of the kind. It would indeed be a piquant termination to a romantic episode. You pull the name of your duchess out of a hat, and forthwith she prostrates herself to worship you for yourself alone. And again it is the way of our sex. The probabilities are that had you laid your heart and fortune at her feet in the time-honoured manner of Mr. Mudie, she would probably have trampled upon both. Really, my poor dear boy, as you sit here now you fulfil my ideas exactly of the manner in which you ought to make your début before the bride-elect. You are so interesting, that surely one is warranted in the anticipation of charming developments of one kind or another."

Upon this excursus the bell was rung and Harriet sent for. She presently appeared, perfectly simple and childishly youthful of aspect, with a glow of health in her cheeks.

"This is the child, Harry. An honest, dutiful creature, with a sympathetic nature."

"Ha! how d'ye do?" said her prospective husband, springing to his feet, and offering her his thin, nervous lath of a hand.

Harriet accepted it with perfect gravity. In a few bold and pleasantly incisive strokes Mrs. Broke outlined the relation in which so recently she had come to stand towards the gentleman before her. She accepted this information also with a gravity that was unabated. Probably a faint blush may have shown itself in her, because the thing was so sudden; she may even have been a little startled; and the large eyes she directed upon the noble valetudinarian may even have had a tinge of wonder in them. But such is training, and such the value of this particular disciplinary system, that Harriet, observing the matter to be under the aegis of her mother, the all-powerful and all-wise, she accepted the fiat as though it were a law of nature.

During the period intervening between the selection of a bride for the noble valetudinarian to lead to the altar, and the transaction of the thousand and one matters

necessary to enable him to do so, Broke was in Cuttisham several times. On one of these occasions he observed a bowed and grey-headed figure shuffling along the High Street immediately in front of him. There was something strikingly familiar in the back view of this object, yet at that moment, with his preoccupied eyes resting only casually upon it, he was at a loss to know of whom it might consist. The force of his recognition was almost ridiculous, and yet it baffled him. When, however, it stopped and turned in at the familiar doorway of Mr. Breffit's estate office, the remarkable yet strangely remote likeness to his old agent rushed upon him.

He desired to consult his man of business on several matters. But since old Breffit had gone to live at Tufton Hall he had been by no means so easy to catch as of yore. It was hardly likely that he would be at his office now, for Broke could not bring himself to admit that the bent figure which had passed in front of him was the person he wished to see. He decided, however, to go in and inquire.

He was informed that Mr. Breffit was there and would see him. And the moment Broke entered the inner room he was aware of the fact that the old man he had failed to recognize a few minutes ago in the street was he who stood before him now.

Our hero's powers of observation were peculiarly limited, but he was shocked by the change in old Breffit. He had last seen him at Tufton a few months ago, a hale and hearty old man, with an almost boyish alertness of demeanour, and a keen zest in life. There was no indication then that anything ailed him. He was one whom you might point to as likely to live to a hundred years old. Now, however, all was changed. The old fire, the old vigour, had passed out of him entirely. In lieu of the vivacious countenance he was wont to present at the appearance of the first of his patrons, there was only a mask that had the coldness of death. In every line was the evidence of a singular deterioration. The erect form, the conscious uplift of the head were no more. The so-shrewd and piercing eyes were bloodshot and vacillating. The hands, once so stable and full of sinew, were nerveless and flabby and shook as though a palsy was upon them. Every feature was weaker and

grosser, a little more lacking in intelligence and self-esteem.

Upon the entrance of Broke this travesty of a once great man lurched forward to greet him, and in so doing lost his balance and nearly measured his length on the carpet. The table saved him.

"Ah, Mr. Broke," he said in a mechanical voice, so little like his habitual eager tones that his old client was shocked by it. "I see it's you. Pleased to see you, sir, pleased to see you. Sit down, sir, won't you?"

The change in the old man's voice and manner was even more remarkable than in his appearance. The supple, ingratiating airs of former days had yielded place to a thick husky indecision of speech and gesture. It occurred to Broke as he looked at him that had it not been old Breffit's boast that he had been a teetotaler all his life he would have supposed he had been drinking heavily.

"'Scuse me, sir," said the old man, reeling before him even now, "but I'm not very well. Not been at all well lately, you know, sir."

"Indeed; I am sorry to hear that. May I ask what is wrong?'

The old man put his hand to his head with a haggard expression as one who suffers an overpowering pain in his brain.

"I—I don't think I quite know myself, sir," he said huskily. "I—I suppose I must be breaking up."

"Surely not, my dear Breffit. Not at your time of life. Why, do you know I thought when I saw you earlier in the summer, that you were just the sort of man to make ninety or even more. Remarkably hale and hearty you were. A country life seemed the—ah—very thing for you."

"I gave up the country more than a month ago. I found it did not agree with me, so I returned to Cuttisham, where I was born, where I have lived all my life, and where, Mr. Broke, I mean to die."

"You—ah—astonish me," said Broke, distressed by that dreary tone in one of such a natural robustness. "I—ah—could not have suspected that a country life would disagree with anybody."

A degree of hesitation appeared in Mr. Breffit that Broke found painful to look upon.

"Ah, sir, it is not altogether a country life that has upset me. You must not think it is altogether that."

The old man seemed to be gathering his resolution to add something to these words to make them plain; but as he came to the point of doing so, he stopped and abruptly turned away his face.

"I am really sorry to see you so run down, Breffit," said his client, with grave kindliness.

When all was said, the old fellow was one of the best and truest friends and servants man ever had. That sight of him installed at Tufton a few months ago, giving himself all manner of airs which nature had never intended should belong to him, had caused his gorge to rise against him, it was true. But, after all, that was but a minor incident in a harmonious and profitable intercourse of many years. He was not the one lightly to forget services faithfully rendered, nor those who had rendered them, whoever they might be. Now to find poor old Breffit broken down utterly in mind and body was to think only of the benefactions he had received at his hands.

"Have you seen a doctor, Breffit? I—ah—suppose you have. I hope it will not prove so serious as you think. I feel sure that a man of your fine constitution, a constitution that has always been envied by all who have known you, cannot be suffering from old age yet awhile. You are not much the wrong side of sixty?"

"Seventy-one, sir. Although people do say I have never looked my age. You see, sir, I have led such a busy and active life that I have had no time to grow old. I have been a worker all my life, Mr. Broke, but suddenly it has come upon me that I can work no more. It has come upon me all at once during the last week or two. I am about done, sir, I am about done."

"No, no, my dear Breffit."

"I have about had my innings, sir. There is nothing to carry me on now. There is nothing to work for, nothing to look forward to. Oh, my God, I wish to-night I could go to bed and never wake any more!"

With an outburst of querulous passion which, to one of Broke's self-contained spirit, was ineffably shocking, the old man suddenly covered his face with his hands and burst

into tears. The next instant, however, he had recovered sufficiently to proceed with his rather piteous monotone.

"At my time of life, you see, sir, a man cannot get new hopes and ideas and begin all over again. He has not the strength and spirit of a younger man to begin building anew when his fine castles that it has taken him the best part of a lifetime to set up have tumbled about his ears. There is a limit to human endurance, sir, and I have reached it. Only one thing do I ask now, and it is the thing your doctors would deny me if they could. But they will not be able to, sir, they will not be able."

"You must not talk like that, my dear Breffit, you must not indeed. Such men as you cannot be spared."

Again the tears began to trickle down the face of his agent.

"You speak very kindly, Mr. Broke, and it gives me pleasure to hear you say that. It comforts me to know I am not despised by everybody."

"I—ah—assure you, my dear Breffit, that so far from being despised you have long had the admiration of many besides myself."

"Ah, sir, you do not know, you do not know! You cannot understand, sir. With all your kindness towards one who is old and unhappy you cannot understand. The fact is, I am heart-broken, sir. You cannot know what it is for the children you have cherished all these long years of anxiety and toil to turn against you, to turn their ungrateful backs upon you."

Broke recoiled from the old man involuntarily, as though a bullet had embedded itself in his flesh, without knowing exactly how it had got in or where. It was like a red-hot wire being drawn across a nerve.

"You don't know, sir, what it is to suffer that from an only son in whom all your hopes have been centred," the old man went on while Broke stood harrowed by this spasm of unexpected agony. "You don't know, sir, and never will know what it is to have your latter days made intolerable by one you have spent the best part of your life in fostering; for whom you would have parted with the coat off your back; to whom you would have given your last penny."

A haggard sweat had begun to creep out of Broke. He strove to close his ears against all the old man said. But it seemed as though there was a devil in his heart that took a foul pleasure in repeating to his protesting senses every syllable his agent uttered.

"I cannot tell you, sir," the horrid voice inside him re-echoed, "what high hopes I had for my boy. Every aspiration I had was centred in him. I procured him the best education, school, sir, and college too, and the finest friends that money could purchase. I filled his mind with lofty thoughts. I purchased a noble mansion and gave it to him; and in my own lifetime, sir, I gave him half my fortune also, that he might be able to hold up his head before the world. And now, sir, having done all this, in what manner do you think he rewards me? I will tell you, Mr. Broke. He laughs at me behind my back, and he shuts the door of his house in my face."

A succession of hard sobs barred the old man's voice, and he was compelled to wait until they had passed.

"Yes, sir, he shuts the door of his house in my face, the house I had purchased for him and paid for in the sweat of my brow! Ah, Mr. Broke, you may well not understand. I wonder if those dear children of yours, sir, could cause their poor father that sort of pain. I think not, sir, I think not. It had always been a dream of mine, sir, that my boy should grow up to be like yours. I know I am a rough diamond myself, 'an impossible person,' as you county people call me. My father had not the means to send me to the public school and the university; I am a self-made man, as all the world knows. I sprang from nothing; I am the architect of my own fortunes, as they say. But I wanted my son to be like that fine lad of yours, Mr. Broke; I wanted him to be the gentleman. And I did by my boy as you did by yours, sir; I lavished money on his education, and afterwards placed him in a position to do justice to it. And now—and now——!"

The old man was unable to conclude the sentence, for again the hard sobs had barred his throat. A no-less measure of anguish had been communicated to the listener. The man before him was merged from the machine of business into the human father. The same complaint

re-echoed in both empty hearts. They were drawn together by the common theme of a son's ingratitude. Broke had endeavoured to banish his own son from his thoughts by an effort of the will; but he had been taught already that, do what he would, the pale spectre of him must be for ever lurking in their outskirts and rendering them horrible. A too-pregnant fact or a moment's relaxation of his vigilance and the spectre glided back into the empty halls where of yore he was wont to reign. The analogy between his agent's case and his own was intolerable. Even in his despair, however, there was the spark of comfort, offered to him by his pride, perhaps in mockery, that his own son had not shown himself capable of the same degree of sordid meanness. There was left that shred of consolation. Thus, when the winter falls about our numb souls do we stretch the threadbare mantles of our pride to cover them!

"I have not the spirit to get over it now," said the maudlin old man. "I am heart-broken. Everything that boy had I gave him and now he turns me from his door. I am not good enough for him and the fine friends that he bought with the money I fought so hard to win for him. He carries his head so high that it overlooks his old father. He and his fine friends laugh at the old man behind his back, and when one or another of them happens to mistake him for the butler they think it is the finest joke in the world. It is Mr. Hamilton-Breffit with him now, Mr. George Hamilton-Breffit with a hyphen. Such a common name as his father's by itself is not good enough for the likes of him. The only thing about me that is good enough for him, sir, is my money. He is still good enough to accept that and make use of it, just as he was good enough to accept and make use of me so long as I could be useful to him. But I cannot be useful to him any more, do you see, sir? I have given him all that he desires, and now he turns round and casts me off like an old coat. He is to marry the daughter of an earl, and then it will be Mr. George and Lady Augusta Hamilton-Breffit. Of course he could not have such 'a shocking old bounder' as me about the place—I am quoting his own words, sir—could he? while that was being arranged.

But for one thing, Mr. Broke, I rejoice. It was wise and right of you to have none of him. You could guess what he was, sir, all the time, you could guess what he was before my eyes were opened. It would have grieved me to see such a one as that polluting a fine old family such as yours. I must ask pardon of you, Mr. Broke, for ever making the suggestion. But you see, sir, he had not come out in his true colours then."

Overborne by his recital of his sorrows, the old man paused, lurched to a cupboard and produced a tumbler and a bottle of brandy.

"I have to take a little something now to keep me going," he said apologetically. "I do not think I could bear up under it at all if I did not."

Broke laid his hand on his shoulder, not without emotion.

"Don't you—ah—think, my dear Breffit, that if you—ah—went away to fresh scenes for a bit it might do you some good? Why not go to the sea or travel on the Continent? I feel sure a doctor would advise it. There is—ah—ah—nothing like a complete change to put a man right."

Mr. Breffit made a hollow laugh.

"It is kindly meant, Mr. Broke, and I thank you, but you do not understand what it means to me. How can you, sir, when you have never had to pass through it yourself, and never will? All the change of scene in the world cannot do me any good. Nothing will ever put me right again. I don't want to be put right. I am old and lonely and tired of life. There is no purpose in it now. I want to die now and leave the remainder of my money to a deserving charity. A quarter of a million is the sum. It seems a lot, does it not, sir? Every penny of it have I earned myself, yet it has brought me no pleasure. I was a much happier man when I was poor; and had I remained poor I do not think I should have had to suffer the ingratitude of an only son. It seems a heavy price to pay for wealth, does it not? A few months ago I was worth half a million, but half of that I gave away to him I can never mention more. I don't know what to do with the rest, sir. But I will write off that little item of Mrs. Broke's; and there are several other trifling little items that the

estate has owed me at various times that I shall write off too. What are a few pounds like that to me? I have neither kith nor kin in the world but that one, the one I worked for late and early, the one I was always planning and devising for. I don't know to what use I can put my money. I should have liked it to have done a little good to somebody, to somebody in whom I took an interest. It has done no good to me and mine. I should like to feel that my life has not been spent quite in vain."

"No one can—ah—say that, my dear Breffit," said Broke, touched more keenly by the old man's despair than he was prepared to admit even to himself. "I—ah—am not in the habit of speaking without reflection, my dear Breffit, but—ah—I can say it from my heart that not in our time at any rate shall we—ah—landowners look on your like again."

The tottering and enfeebled old man drank off the stiff glass of brandy he had mixed for himself. He then peered up rather timidly to the first among his clients with a wistful brightness suddenly running in his dull eyes.

"It gives me pleasure to hear you say that, sir; it is just what I should like to have said of me. I—I thank you, sir."

Suddenly the old man bent forward to his oldest client with something of his former nervous vivacity.

"I wish, Mr. Broke, you were not so proud," he said, with an eager furtiveness that was also slightly wistful.

Our hero did not reply to a charge that he was prepared to sustain against himself. And he was far too obtuse to apprehend the particular train of thought that was underlying it in the present instance. In his mind there was not the faintest connection between this speech and what had passed immediately before. Drink and misfortune had doubtless undermined the poor old fellow a good deal. It was useless to trouble oneself by trying to find out what he meant. The old man, meeting with no response whatever, had not the courage to pursue a subject upon which he had been bracing up all his faculties to enter.

"You hear people say," he continued, with a relapse into his dreary strain, "that wealth means happiness. But from my heart, sir, I can say it is a curse. It is the

possession of money alone that has brought me to this. It is money that has made my only son a better man than his father ; had I remained poor and he had been poor also, he would never have broken my heart by despising me in my old age. Wealth is responsible for evils far beyond those of poverty. I began poor enough, as indeed God knows ! but when, fifty years ago, I had only bread and cheese to my dinner, and not always that, life was a very different thing."

For a long time the old man went on in this maudlin way. With weary iteration he continued to harp upon that which had overborne him. Broke remained deeply affected by the change in that sane and alert spirit ; and he was oppressed also by a sense of analogy to the too-poignant emotions that lately had taxed the whole strength of his nature. Thus at the first opportunity he made a pretext for effecting his escape.

It was well to breathe again the outer air after being confined in that intolerable room reeking with the fumes of brandy. But every step of his way back to Covenden he could not rid his mind of the shadow of a once-great man he had left there. He had never had the least tenderness for his agent in his capacity as a human being. He stood to him in the relation of a machine for the conduct of business, pure and simple ; and more than once the thought had occurred to him that, even considered as a machine, he was neither pure nor simple. He had always looked on him as one who, over and above his indisputable business gifts, was sordid, grasping, and unscrupulous : a rather vulgar charlatan whom it was good to have at your elbow when you were compelled by the remorseless conditions imposed upon those who happened to be landowners, landlords and agriculturists to have dealings with other vulgar charlatans. He had the useful knack of looking after your interests at the same moment he looked after his own. To-day, for the first time, the old man took his place in human nature. The total wreck of a mind so strong, under the stress of anguish, was one of the most painful things Broke had ever witnessed.

For an hour it gripped him by the heart. He could think of nothing else. The drunken, tottering, blurred

and broken figure rode by his side all the way home. It may have been that he had snatched as from a mirror a glimpse of his own image. He had been shaken to a far greater extent than he cared to acknowledge by the reminders he had received of his own personal afflictions. And it seemed strange indeed that he should suddenly find himself with so much in common with a man like old Breffit. Yet, was it not a little tragic too? In the bosom of our feudalist, however, the thought uppermost was that such a state of things suggested one of those fantastic theories formulated by those bodies of pseudo-scientific persons who went about calling themselves by various names. It almost seemed as if he was about to run the danger of being forced to admit that all the world over human nature was much the same. To this representative of an elder period, a period of rather more primitive ideas than those obtaining in that into which, rather malevolently, he had been projected, the people who belonged to the diverse sections of the social scheme not only had a distinguishing set of manners and customs, other modes of speech and dress and wholly different points of view, but their fundamental emotions were widely different too. It was peculiarly irksome to be in danger of having to admit that such a person as Joseph Breffit could have so much as a heart-beat in common with a person such as Edmund Broke.

CHAPTER XXXIX

The Last Night

DUST-TARNISHED summer passed to autumn of the mellow tints and afterwards to the later season of nature's desolation, but it was no more than that of the family of Covenden. The young voices of laughter and merriment seemed to have died with the leaves of those summer days. From the shock of Delia's flight they could not recover. Coming almost immediately upon the episode of their brother, it was a crowning blow. It knocked their world askew; and in their dazed and wondering fashion they felt that nothing ever would set it right.

They entered into the sudden marriage of Harriet without enthusiasm. They kissed her with trembling lips when she went away; but her smiles were as wan as theirs. All things that had the sanction of their parents they knew how to accept without question, in the same manner that all things that had it not they could not tolerate. But when they thought of the dying man their sister was to marry it was with a shudder; and the flowers in her hair looked like cypress leaves.

The night before she was to be married, they sat up far beyond their usual hour. They clustered very close together in their common room, all unutterably sad and somewhat frightened. To have been able to indulge in tears would have been a relief, but that had never been their habit.

"We shall miss you, old Hat," they said. "How we shall miss you!"

The tight-lipped Harriet clung first in the arms of one and then in those of another. She was very cold and pale and her heart was beating violently.

"I wish you were not going to leave us, Hat," said Philippa mournfully.

Harriet clung to her more convulsively, and buried her cold face against her. There was the harsh, repressed sound of a sob.

As they sat in a half circle round the fireplace, which had no more than a few dying embers in it, their chins were resting on their hands and their heavy eyes could see nothing but darkness. Out of their so slender pocket money they had contrived to subscribe for a wedding present to make to their sister: a riding whip mounted in silver, with the letter "H" engraved upon the handle. Joan placed it in her hand with a low-voiced apology for its humble character.

"We would have bought you a tiara, old Hat," she said, "with real diamonds in it if only we had had the money. We cannot tell you what we would have bought you if only we had had the money. Oh, how we shall miss you! How lonely we shall be without you!"

She pressed her frozen lips against her sister's cold, white face.

"The old jolly times will never come back," said Margaret. "What dear jolly days they have been, but they are over now. They will never come back."

There came a dead hush. They all gazed straight before them, with their eyes growing dimmer and dimmer. The same thought was common to them all.

"I wish Del was here," said Jane suddenly and softly.

"Poor little Del!" said Margaret, with an equal suddenness and softness.

"Hush," said Joan.

"Delia is happy," said Harriet, softly putting her arm round the trembling form of Joan.

"Hush," said Joan again.

"We shall never all ride to the Meet again with father and Billy and Uncle Charles," said Philippa.

"Hush, hush," said Joan, trembling more violently in the arms of Harriet.

"We did not know what dear, sweet times they were," said Philippa. "Only now do we begin to realize it, now that they are gone. To think how happy we all were together a year ago, and to see us now! It does not seem possible that so much can have changed in one short little year. Still, in those that are to come we shall be able to remember those dear, dear old days, and think that we were happy once."

"Don't!" they implored her.

"I cannot help it," said Philippa, who was shivering in the arms of Margaret.

"But there is perhaps a silver lining to a cloud like this," said Harriet with a valour that was desperate when accompanied by that white face and cruelly beating heart. "There will be no more cycling to hounds for you four, will there? The dear, dear old horses will go round now all the season through with the one that Uncle Charles is going to give you. I said good-bye to all of them this morning. And I do believe they knew. It nearly made me cry to kiss their dear old velvet noses. I am sure they knew I was leaving them. Dear old things! It will not seem like living at all to be without the Doctor, and Crusader, and the Colonel, and Pat, and Persephone, and Whitenose, and Juliet, and Robin, and poor lame old Prettyface. I am sure they knew!"

"Which will you choose to take, old Hat?" said Joan. "Persephone was always your special friend, wasn't she? It was you who gave her a grand sounding name to make it up to her a bit, because she was not so well bred as some of the others. But you shall have one of the thoroughbreds, too. There is the Doctor and Pat and Juliet."

"No, Joan," said Harriet, with a choking firmness. "I have no right. I would dearly love one of them just for the sake of the dear old days that will never come back. But it would not be fair. I shall have ever so many horses, although they can never, never be the same."

No amount of insistence on the part of her self-sacrificing sisters would induce her to alter her resolve. Like them, she had learned to subdue her private instincts for the common good.

There was present at this last gathering so mournful, so exquisite, so tender beyond expression, a sense of the impending that they could not explain. Billy and Delia were lost to them for ever; their father was ageing visibly every day; to-morrow Harriet was to be plucked out of their arms to undergo a life of great unhappiness; but over and above all these accumulated sorrows, there was a sense of those more dreadful, because unnamed, that were to come. Shadows out of the future were thrown before their eyes. These forebodings may have been the fruit of that sore mutilation of their instincts which had of late infected them in so cruel a degree with the sense of tears in mortal things.

Mrs. Broke visited Harriet that night as she lay in her bed sleepless and wide-eyed. She bent over the white face and touched the cold forehead with her lips.

"It is for us all, my dear one," she said in a low voice. "I thank you for being so sweet and patient and obedient. It may seem a little hard to you, my dear one; but for your father and myself and your sisters it is also hard. But I am sure I have no need to say it; you are all good, brave girls; and you would not hesitate to help your father and myself in any way that was asked of you. You have always been perfectly right-minded, perfectly amenable, always a great comfort to us both."

Harriet, in common with her sisters, had passed her life in abject fear of the awful being she called mother. She was afraid of her at this moment, although the awful being was talking to her in a manner of tenderness that was entirely new. The prepossessions of a lifetime are not to be uprooted in a minute. Yet, in fear of her mother as she was the dread of her was not so great as of the new life that lay before her. There would be no affectionate bond of sisterhood, no boon companionships, no proud yet tender father, no dear, querulous, kind-hearted uncle to alleviate her sense of loneliness, or enlighten that black abyss that was called the Future. Convulsively as she had clung to her sisters an hour ago, she clung to her mother now.

Mrs. Broke was deeply affected by the passionate silence of the child. The grip of the cold hands, the pressure of the

cold cheek against her own, the frozen sobs, the roving, frightened eyes told too poignantly of all that was passing in her. Increasingly difficult as it had become of late, it had never been harder than at this moment to keep the mask of inscrutability upon her face. Her very soul had fallen faint of late. Life was growing to demand too much. Less and less were the gains becoming worth the price. To what end was all this pinching and scraping and contriving, this frenzy of expedience? Two children of her flesh had been torn out of her arms by Circumstance, that ruthless bully, and now she was yielding up a third wantonly and of her own free will. She pressed a last caress, a brief final memento of hungry love, on the cold face, and quitted the room with unsteady haste. She went down to her husband, who sat reading the *Field* in the enfolding gloom and silence of the library. At the sound of her entrance he put down his newspaper, and looked at his wife earnestly.

"Well, old girl."

Of late he had exhibited a tenderness for her which she was inclined to feel as slightly exaggerated in one of such a self-contained and frugal spirit.

"You look tired," he said, peering at her through the shadows cast by the reading-lamp. "You work that brain of yours too hard. I wish you did not overdrive it quite so much. You want a rest."

Mrs. Broke forced a laugh. It jangled a discord among our hero's nerves.

"Suppose you go to the sea for a fortnight, and take the girls? They want a change, too."

"Yes, Edmund, if you come also."

Broke repudiated the suggestion with scorn.

"What do I want with a change? I am as strong as an oak tree. Besides, what about the shooting?"

His wife looked only at the thin hair upon his temples and his sunken cheeks. The appearance of the robust, ruddy farmer of the early summer was with him no more. In an incredibly short time it had given place to something far otherwise. In a few brief months he had become a travesty of what he had been once. As they peered at one another a profound silence intervened suddenly. It

was acute in its completeness. They were both thinking of the same thing.

" I wish there was not that wedding coming off," said Broke, terminating it with the same abruptness that it had begun. " I wish we had not to go to it. We shall miss poor little Hat very much."

" The child is very brave and good. But it is another vacant place. One hardly understands what they mean to one until they go. Three in a few brief months! Do you not think, Edmund, you could make it only two?"

" What do you mean?" said Broke, with a harsh change in his voice.

" Will you not go to the cottage and accept that poor lonely child? It might make things easier for her; and I am sure, Edmund, it would for us."

" When, my poor girl, will you learn to understand that when certain books are closed they cannot be opened again?"

" Never, Edmund."

" Why this — ah — morbid craving to reopen old wounds?"

" It is by that means, Edmund, and that means only, that we shall be brought to recognize the blindness and futility of our acts."

" Good night. I am going to bed."

Our hero rose from his chair as abruptly as he spoke, and walked out of the room.

CHAPTER XL

In which Mr. Breffit the Elder writes off another Little Item of his Account

A FEW days afterwards there came a painful piece of news. Old Mr. Breffit had fallen downstairs and broken his neck. Broke and his wife were greatly shocked.

"Poor, poor old man," said Mrs. Broke. "And on the eve, too, of his son's marriage."

"Ah, a tale hangs thereby," said Broke darkly. "I think I had better tell it; the moral is not to be despised."

Thereupon he gave a few salient particulars of his last singular interview with the old man at Cuttisham.

"I remember it made a rather horrible impression upon me at the time. I believe he was drinking himself to death then. The change in the poor old fellow was appalling. I call the whole business as pitiable as anything I have ever known."

"I call it tragedy," said Mrs. Broke. "That the unfortunate man should spend his life in the pursuit of a thing which was so bitterly to recoil upon him! It seems very ruthless, very cruel. The poor old man must be enormously wealthy."

"He told me the exact figures, but I forget them. By the way, I can recall a rather strange expression he made use of. He said he was at a loss to know what to do with the quarter of a million or so he had not already given to his son. He assumed that he would have to bestow it on deserving charities, as he had no other kith or kin. And then I remember the poor old fellow said suddenly, in a

very odd, queer way, 'I wish you were not so proud, Mr. Broke.' At the time I did not follow his meaning, but it struck me afterwards that he may have looked on me as a deserving charity also."

"Perhaps he did, Edmund."

"He may. Even at that time he was very far gone in drink."

"Had this hypothesis occurred to you at the time how would you have answered him?"

"Well, I suppose I should have been obliged to laugh at the poor maudlin old fool, although I am sure it would have given me pain. I never saw a man change so much in so short a time."

This chance phrase of the late Mr. Breffit's, and the hebetude of her husband in regard to it was a source of grave unhappiness to Mrs. Broke. In her imagination she heightened its significance until it shone forth as a deliberate renunciation of a sum of money that would have set them on their legs again. Strictly speaking, it was nothing of the kind; but so prone are our minds to magnify the might-have-been that a fact not momentous in itself assumed inordinate proportions.

There was another aspect to the affair that had better-grounded reasons for causing her distress. The sum of two thousand pounds she had borrowed from Mr. Breffit for purposes of private speculation would be demanded more peremptorily by the executors of his will than it would have been by the old man himself.

"I don't know what we shall do when they come down upon us for it," she said. "If they were to distrain upon our personal goods I do not think at the present time they would make two thousand pounds. In any case, we shall be obliged to give up Covenden almost at once."

"I—ah—think you take an extreme view," said Broke, but his face had a fluttered look of alarm. "I—ah—ah—believe Breffit said he would not press for the money; although, when we get it, it shall certainly be repaid. But I—ah—think we had better not bother our heads about it just now. Things have always sorted themselves out for us a bit in one way or another. Let us hope they always will."

"You remind me, my poor Edmund, of the man who stated the other day in regard to this hideous mess in South Africa, that he supposed we should manage 'to muddle through,' as so often we had muddled through before. It is reassuring to find two such representative Englishmen as yourself and the First Lord of the Treasury taking such a statesmanlike view of the predicament in which you happen to find yourselves. Clearly it is a case of two highly practical and pre-eminently reasonable minds jumping together. The doctrine of 'what has been will be' may be comfortable enough as far as it goes; but I must confess to a merely mundane and unenlightened intelligence such as mine its limitations are apt to appear a little grievous."

"We must keep pegging away, anyhow," said Broke, making no attempt, as was his custom, to follow his wife through the course of her dialectics. "And you—ah—will find things will come out all right in the end."

"Now that Mr. Breffit is no more, we shall have to cast about for a new agent. It is hardly likely that his son will carry on the business. I shudder to think how serious a matter it may prove. Our affairs are so hopelessly compromised that it may be impossible to get a new man to undertake the responsibility of dealing with them. It is only now that Mr. Breffit is gone that we shall fully realize what we have owed to his fidelity and sagacity. And to his generosity we have owed even more. I am convinced—although in the case of a man with such a reputation for hard business qualities, the statement on the face of it may appear absurd—that he has lost rather than gained by the transaction of our affairs."

"I cannot believe that," said Broke doughtily.

"I am convinced it is so, Edmund, of late years at least. We owe that old man a debt of gratitude; and we shall only begin to realize how great it is when we are confronted with the unwillingness of others to let us incur another. It seems a ridiculous thing to say, but I believe of late years, since he came to be so prosperous, that all the old man has done for us has been a labour of love. I believe he had a whim that caused him to take a pride in serving us for ourselves alone. You may smile, Edmund, but of late I have had that conclusion forced upon me. Without his dis-

interested services we could not possibly have weathered the storm until this hour. I believe, Edmund, that you personally stood in the relation of a sort of hero to him. You were his *beau idéal* of the landed proprietor, the perfect mirror and pattern of what he could have wished to be himself, had his lot at the beginning been cast in other and easier places. And I am sure that you and yours stood for the model on which he endeavoured to fashion his son. Indeed, more than once did he confess it."

"I—ah—hope the likeness he has contrived to produce is not flattering."

"Let us hope not; but to me, I admit, the whole thing seems ineffably touching. We may despise the old man, but I wonder where we should have been without him all these years. And now, Edmund, I am convinced that the only course left for us is to submit to the inevitable. Covenden must be given up. To keep it on another year is impossible. Here, now, must we make the confession to ourselves that our ruin is complete. There is no quarter to which we can look now for succour to tide over our affairs. And if there were, there would still be no hope of better times ahead. Edmund, let us yield before we are compelled to do so by the court of bankruptcy."

These were grievous and bitter words to Broke. To give up Covenden, the home from time immemorial of him and his and all that he held dear, struck right at his heart. He would sooner have given up life itself. But he knew that his wife was not guilty of exaggeration. Circumstances had forced him to recognize that the stage their affairs had reached was very dire. But he was only just beginning to realize how hard they had been hit by the death of Breffit. Here again his wife was to be trusted implicitly. She was far better acquainted with their complex dealings with Breffit than was he. But the plain facts she had unfolded of the benevolence of that strange old man galled him bitterly. He was the last person in the world consciously to submit to deliberate benefactions. But it seemed that the whirlpool of events in whose vortex he had long been caught was stronger, subtler, more inexorable than even his most cherished prejudices.

Presently there came a day when the tragic death of old

Breffit acquired a new phase for the family of Covenden. The particulars of it were embodied in a small packet addressed to our hero from a firm of solicitors. It consisted of two letters: one, in a familiar spidery handwriting addressed to Broke himself; the other in a more clerkly and official one to his only son. The former communication was of this nature—

"DEAR MR. BROKE,—I have been thinking a good deal during the last few days of the use to which I shall devote the remainder of my fortune, hoping and trusting as I do that my end is now very near. And it has seemed to me better to place it at the disposal of one in whom I have taken a deep interest for such a long time, rather than at the disposal of a charitable institution of which I should know little. To that end I have caused my will to be altered in the favour of your son Mr. William. He may, of course, not choose to take my money; but if the assurance is likely to carry any weight, I would like it to be made to him that his acceptance of the remainder of my considerable fortune will confer an obligation on one who is old and unhappy. The testator will be able to feel after all that his money is doing some real good to somebody in the world, to somebody in whom he hopes it is not presumptuous to say he has long taken a deep interest; and by that means that all his lifetime of labour has not been wholly in vain. If Mr. William confers this favour upon one who is old and unhappy, he will incur his deep gratitude, although he will not be here to bestow his thanks upon him. I may say that the gross value of the estate which I wish to place in the hands of your son is some two hundred and seventy thousand pounds, as nearly as I can approximate, less death duties and various small legacies to servants, and fees and expenses of executors. I remain, dear Mr. Broke, always yours truly,

"JOSEPH BREFFIT."

Broke's meditations on this remarkable document were long and deep. At last he was able so far to detach himself from them as to take his wife into his confidence. He gave her the letter. She read it with a reeling brain.

" It is impossible to understand at first all that it means," she said in a feeble voice. " One has to read it a hundred times over before one can gain a sense of what is implied."

" I—ah—do not see that it means anything."

" It assures the future of Billy."

The muscles of Broke's face were under such control that it remained a mask.

" It therefore assures the future of us all."

In the rush of feeling the letter provoked she was displaying some excitement.

" It does nothing of the kind," said Broke, intensely calm.

" Surely, Edmund, a stroke of providence of this bewildering nature will cause you to reconsider the position you have taken up. Surely in the face of an event fraught with so much significance for us all, you will learn to condone and even to forget."

" I—ah—fail to see that the case has been altered in a single aspect that is material. I cannot discuss it."

" Are there no limits to your unreason, Edmund ? Is it possible you are still blind to the fate that threatens to overtake us ? Is it possible you do not understand what this bequest means to you personally ? If you continue in this attitude you will be guilty not only of a crime against yourself, but against that you value more."

The only reply our hero made to these words was to walk out of the room abruptly.

All the same, worked upon in a high degree by this unparalleled stroke of fortune, Mrs. Broke could not forbear to exult. Her old detached habit of mind had been a good deal mitigated of late by a vital succession of circumstances. For the moment she declined resolutely to look at the dark side of the picture as represented by Broke's attitude. It was enough that the immediate sordid exigencies cast upon them by the crying need of mere pounds and shillings was allayed for ever. And what a door was opened ! Reconciliation was bound to follow inevitably, if Broke continued to be a human being. In the first flush of her enthusiastic gratitude it seemed to this woman and mother that a beneficent providence had deliberately and dramatically selected the most effectual means of saving them all from

ruin, and at the same time of restoring to her two of the so-cherished children of her heart. For, enthusiasm still taking its head in her, she allowed herself to foresee that the moment Broke was obliged to extend his sanction to the one child, he would also be obliged to extend it to the other.

Under the spur of her excitement, Mrs. Broke lost no time in going to the little cottage on the hill to communicate the wonderful news. But even as she entered it she was conscious that the atmosphere in which the small place was enveloped was in strange contrast to the great joy in her own heart. For there was ever the pall of desolation on that place now. The light had gone out of the lives of the two lonely women. Their brief dream of happiness had vanished all too soon. For all the pure and free airs of the countryside the young wife seemed to grow frailer every day. The fount of all inspiration in her life was dry; and in her spirit was the knowledge that it would not be allowed to flow again.

Night and day was she haunted with the conviction that she, and she only, had wrought the ruin of him who was more to her than life. All unwittingly had she done this for no nicer reason than the gratification of herself. Whenever that thought recurred to her—and not a day, not a night passed, but what it did—she was overborne with self-loathing. It was by this unconsidered act of hers that her lover had become a social leper, outcast for ever from his friends. He had called down upon his head the implacable displeasure of a father whose pride in him formerly had been so great, wounded his kind mother to the heart, alienated the love of the fondest sisters in the world, all—all to gratify a wretched and impotent being who in the sum of things was of no account. Introspections of this kind grew too indescribably bitter. The impress of the cruel claws they bore could be counted daily on the delicate flesh.

When Mrs. Broke came to the cottage that memorable morning of the late November, and opened the door, aunt and niece were seated at a table before a neat bright fire. They were reading a letter that had recently arrived from South Africa, although both could have repeated every

word of it by heart already. Upon the entrance of their benefactress they rose immediately. Mrs. Broke went over to the fireside and kissed her daughter-in-law in a fashion of strange tenderness.

"I have brought great news for you, my dear child—oh, so great!"

"I—I think we know it, ma'am, already," said Miss Sparrow, with a certain triumph in her timidity.

"Surely not, my dear Miss Sparrow. The lawyers could hardly have written to you, as they do not know your address. Still, they may have found it out; lawyers are very clever."

"Oh, no, ma'am, not the lawyers. Mr. William wrote to us himself."

"But surely, my dear Miss Sparrow, *he* can hardly know of it yet."

"Oh yes, ma'am, here it is written in his own handwriting. Is not this the great news that you mean, ma'am? Promotion has come to him very quickly, has it not? considering it is only about a month since he rejoined the army as a private soldier. But they are very quick in the army. They soon find out what a man is worth, as I have heard my Uncle Edward say."

The old woman placed Billy's letter into the hands of his mother in proud confirmation of this fact. She indicated a pregnant passage with her finger. It ran: "I am now a full-blown sergeant in the Rhodesian Light Horse. It is not so bad, is it? seeing that I was a trooper for only about nine days. If I go on at this rate I shall be commanding a division of cavalry in a year!"

Mrs. Broke successfully repressed her pity.

"The news I have brought you is better even than that."

Aunt and niece looked at her in meek bewilderment. She allowed them time to enjoy their delicious thrills of expectation.

"You don't mean to say, ma'am, they have made him a troop sergeant-major already," said the excited Miss Sparrow. "Because, if they have, ma'am, I call it wonderful. My Uncle Edward came to be a troop sergeant-major in the Dragoon Guards, but it took him years and years.

It is very wonderful if they have, for all, ma'am, that Mr. William is such a wonderful gentleman."

" No, my dear Miss Sparrow, it is something even better. A letter arrived this morning to tell us that he had come into a great fortune, quite unexpectedly. There is no reason for him now to stay away from you another day. What do you say to that ? Is it not glorious news ? "

Aunt and niece folded their hands upon their bosoms simultaneously, and in the same manner. The old aunt began to weep softly, which is still, perhaps, the only true method of expressing female joy. In the bright eyes of the niece was a hungry radiance. But her lips were compressed.

" Come, my dear child," said Mrs. Broke, " I am sure you will rejoice. But I wish I could see you looking a little happy. For I am sure he will come back at once; and it will not be necessary for you ever to be parted from one another again."

" He will never come back," said the young wife, with a desolate quietude.

" That is very wrong, my dear child. We must not have you talk so. You are a little depressed; you must keep up your strength as much as you can. I hope you have drunk all the port I sent you. Some more is coming to-day."

The frail child shook her head.

" What can have put these morbid thoughts into your poor head, I wonder ? You must banish these dark fancies, especially at a time like this, when you require all the courage you can summon."

Again the young wife shook her head. She pressed a thin hand on her side.

" I have something here in my heart," she said, " that tells me he will never return. As soon as this terrible war broke out, I saw clearly in what way God intended to punish me."

" But why should He punish you, my poor child ? "

" Because I have been so wicked; because in trying to gain my own happiness I have marred that of others—of others who are so much better and nobler in every way than I am myself."

" Who has put these foolish and cruel fancies into your

mind, my dear one? What mischievous nonsense is this?"

"They have all come there secretly out of my own thoughts. I was blind at first, blind with love; but my eyes are open now, and I can see. I have ruined my husband; and just to gratify my own wishes I have brought a horrid sorrow on him and his. Only too well do I know what will be the end."

"Your husband is anything but ruined. He is now a very rich man indeed; and I am going to write to him here now, from his own house, to tell him of his singular good fortune, to tell him of the condition of his wife, and that his affairs require his immediate presence in England. Can you find me a pen and ink and writing-paper and an envelope, Miss Sparrow? You can then see exactly what I write."

With a finely feminine disregard for the circumstances in which Billy was at that moment placed, Mrs. Broke wrote her letter. Her commands were very peremptory. His absence was breaking the heart of his wife, who had the sorest need of him. She informed him that a sum of two hundred and seventy thousand pounds had been left to him from a wholly unexpected quarter. She omitted, however, to put a name to the source whence it came. When she had composed this production she read it aloud to the two white-faced women. She was desirous firmly to impress their minds with the fact that this rare piece of good fortune had actually come to pass, and that their days of repining would soon be at an end.

"There, my dear child, you can read it for yourself. You shall stamp the envelope. And for his sake and that of another you must try to be happy and of good faith until he comes again into this little room. It means but a short week or two of waiting. Think of that—only one short week or two; and put away your morbid fancies."

Alice shook her head in despair.

"God will know how to punish me," was her reply.

In spite of herself Mrs. Broke was oppressed. The prepossession in the child's mind haunted her notwithstanding the powerful revival of her optimism by that day's news. It had seemed as though at last their luck had begun to

turn. But the mood in which she had found Alice had done much to dispel the illusion. There was an air of finality with which she predicted the event she foresaw as though it had already come to be.

Indeed, with Alice the happy and significant circumstance that had summoned Mrs. Broke to her did not weigh, however Billy's mother might magnify it and insist upon it. The outbreak of war in South Africa, coming at such a period in her life, dominated her completely with the sense of its inexorable purpose. Her obsession was such that to her it seemed that millions of persons had been plunged into anguish that one erring, obscure soul in a remote country cottage might be visited with the implacable justice that was her merit.

CHAPTER XLI

Rien n'est sacré pour un sapeur

WE come now to a week in December when not only Covenden and its family, but every citizen in that consummate kingdom of Great Britain and Birmingham was precipitated into the vortex of panic.

It was at its height when Mrs. Broke and Lady Bosket chanced to foregather and discussed the only possible topic.

"I do not know whether you have heard, Jane," said Lady Bosket, with a rather complacent air, "that Charles is trying to get out to South Africa."

Mrs. Broke smiled.

"I have heard of it. But I daresay, Emma, you are not aware that the ambition is common to our staid and sober Edmund."

"I am sure it does Edmund great credit, although one would hardly have suspected it. One would have said he would have been quite the last man in the world to be capable of self-sacrifice."

"Colenso finished him. He has told the War Office and the depôt that he will go out in any capacity if only they will take him. But I am reposing the fullest confidence in his age. What ridiculous creatures men are! You see, Emma, I am not afraid to quote you. That is an original aphorism of yours, I believe."

The authoress purred.

"I am afraid it is too much to hope that Charles' chance is brighter," she said wistfully. "One would be so thankful if he contrived to dedicate the smallest portion of his long and useless life to the service of his country. But

only too keenly does one apprehend that even if the doctors pass him on the score of age, he will be disqualified by a constitution undermined by drink. But I must say, Jane, that your tone wounds one a little. Do you wish one to infer that you are anxious that Edmund should not fulfil his obligation to his country?"

"Of course one does not pretend to your gifts of expression, my dear, but one could sometimes wish you adopted a less controversial method of employing them."

"What do you mean, Jane?" said the authoress, bridling.

Mrs. Broke's smile assumed an inscrutable quality, but she did not reply. Lady Bosket, feeling that it was impossible for her sister-in-law to make one, warmed to the theme. She said—

"It behoves every man and woman in this country to contribute something to the new and beautiful idea we call Imperialism. I understood you to say, Jane, that you trusted Edmund was too old to go to the Front. How can any Englishwoman talk in that way? I hope, Jane, you are not a Little Englander."

"Likewise, Emma, you hope piously that I am not a pro-Boer," said her demure sister-in-law.

"I do, indeed, Jane, but I have my fears."

"I am afraid, my dear, it is inevitable that I should embody at least one of the cant terms which are going about. But I ask you, Emma, in your capacity as an arch-moulder of public opinion, do you not think it something of a pity that as a nation we are so conspicuously lacking in a sense of proportion? It seems to me, I confess, that that is where the national absence of humour is to be deplored. It safeguards us from many things, but it has always seemed to me that we lose a little too."

"Jane, I must say that this tone of flippancy at such a crisis in our national life is out of place, is indeed a little shocking."

"From your impregnable standpoint, Emma, I am bound to concede that you are perfectly right; from my own somewhat more speculative one the side of the question I venture to put before you is not wholly indefensible."

"Wholly, Jane, wholly, I can assure you."

"I bow, my dear, of course, to your impregnability; but I would that some blessed gift of heaven could be vouchsafed to us by which we could be saved occasionally from ourselves. One hardly likes to see the entire kingdom of Great Britain and Birmingham surrendering itself cheerfully to the ridiculous."

Mrs. Broke's smile broadened steadily, to the frank dismay of her gifted relation. Broke and Lord Bosket entered the room at this critical moment, however, and averted any further amenities that were likely to ensue between them. It seemed that both these gentlemen had been that day to place their services at the disposal of their country. A little ruefully they had to confess that their country had shown no disposition to accept them.

"They are letting callow and puny understrappers go out," Broke complained, "but they will have none of a pair of grown and seasoned men like Charles and myself."

Mrs. Broke made no secret of her somewhat whimsical relief. Lady Bosket, on the contrary, proceeded immediately to launch a crushing diatribe against the unreasonable and arbitrary behaviour of the War Office.

"I certainly cannot pretend to be surprised about Charles. It would be affectation to say that I am. I quite expected it, but I can assure him that he has only himself to blame. But you, Edmund, are so different. It strikes one as the very height of the absurd that they should decline the services of a temperate, healthy, and wholesome person such as you are."

"So it does," said Broke bitterly. "They say we are too old."

"As though a man can ever be too old to place his services at the disposal of his country! How much longer, I would ask, are we going to tolerate this monstrous War Office? It is as incompetent as our so-called generals."

"I—ah—beg your pardon."

"I said, Edmund, that the War Office is as incompetent as our so-called generals."

"I—ah—must beg to differ, Emma."

This concise statement took our autocratic lady by surprise. In this house, whatever her opinions, they went unquestioned. But Broke's opposition was explicit. The

measure of his resentment was expressed by the oddest sternness in his tone.

"You must pardon my bluntness, Emma. I know I—ah—am a blunt man—it is—ah—natural to me—but statements of this kind cannot pass unchallenged. At a time like this we ought to recognize that the generals at the—ah—Front are doing their best. They are serving the country to the best of their ability."

"Hear, hear," said Lord Bosket. "My sentiments too."

"A very poor best; a very small ability!" interjected Lady Bosket venomously. It was coming to something for Edmund to undertake to break a lance with *her*.

"Their best none the less," said Broke with an increasing sternness. "A debt of gratitude is due from each one of us personally for their efforts on our behalf."

"So it is, damn it, so it is!" said Lord Bosket earnestly.

"They are not above criticism, I should hope," said his lady.

"It is to our eternal dishonour if they are not, allow me to say," said Broke, with an approach to vehemence.

"I do not choose to have my intelligence impeached by yours, Edmund," said our patriotic lady, suddenly becoming very angry indeed.

Broke, however, for once in a way, was ruffled. The very depths of disloyalty had been touched. To call in question the conduct of the war in a single detail was impermissible. He was the thorough-going type of person by whom the lions of the British Army were led to death and glory.

In the meantime Lord Bosket and Mrs. Broke were enjoying keenly this pretty little difference between our two ardent patriots.

"Let 'em fight it out," said Lord Bosket impartially to his sister. "The missis will claw him a bit, but my money's on Edmund. He's as tough as a nail. He don't speak often, but when he does he gets a bull's eye. The missis is the prettier sparrer, lighter and smarter, and can shift her feet quicker, but Edmund's got more stamina and can punish better. It's a thousand to five on Edmund."

"The generals are a disgrace. They have not the intelligence of Charles and the girls. They are making us

the laughing-stock of Europe. Already they have tarnished our glorious traditions, and if they are allowed to go on they will ruin the empire."

"It is a scandal that people should be allowed to say this kind of thing openly. They—ah—would not stand it in Germany."

Lady Bosket's voice went higher as Broke's grew deeper. One was a scream, the other a growl. Long ago had our intrepid lady recovered from the nervous breakdown which had followed a certain encounter with her spouse, although, to be sure, she had never been quite the same woman since. But having no physical arguments to apprehend in this instance—a contingency rightly to be dreaded by the most redoubtable professors of the intellectual—she was able to be quite sufficiently valiant. She stood her ground with the consciousness of a sublime purpose. The occasion was too grave for the mouths of true-born Englishwomen to be stopped with dust. She hoped Edmund had seen her letter to the *Spectator*.

Our hero was really angry. He felt he was to blame for allowing himself to be drawn into argument on a sacred topic by irresponsible and illiterate women. He could not think what the Government was about to permit the circulation of this sort of blasphemy. Our fine constitutional edifice was endangered by such an immoral freedom of speech. That was the worst of an absolutely free country. It had no control over the most vicious forms of ignorance. There were numbers of persons dwelling in the island at this hour whose opinions were so repugnant that he keenly regretted he did not enjoy the privilege of being able to commit them to prison with hard labour.

"Emma," said our heated gentleman, "you talk like a pro-Boer."

"You are one, Edmund," said our no less heated lady.

Their argument having been conducted to this successful phase, Mrs. Broke deemed it time to intervene. She parted the combatants with her customary smiling gallantry.

"Excellent! Excellent! Charles, I think you will concur with me in the decision that honours are easy. A drawn battle. At the present moment the comprehensive term 'pro-Boer' clearly defines the limits of our contro-

versial boundary. One recognizes it as the inevitable conclusion to which all argument tends. The most speculative intellect cannot conceive of any more drastic or final termination. I was called a pro-Boer this morning by Edmund; Edmund is called a pro-Boer this afternoon by Emma; and this evening I have a presentiment that all the upper servants, at least in the Hipsley household, will resign in a body because of Emma's decided pro-Boer tendencies. The universal trend is in the direction of the pro-Boer. One foresees the time is at hand when the only people remaining in the world who are not pro-Boer are the Boers themselves. No etymologist seems able to grasp what the term implies in all its comprehensiveness, unless it is merely a convenient epithet, a *façon de parler*, as was the term Radical of old, or Papist, or Jesuit, or Heretic, or Prick-eared Knave, whose sole purpose it was to enable every self-respecting English citizen to thank God he was not quite so bad as his neighbour. From the beginning we were a nation of Pharisees; the Saxons, the Danes and the Normans who have gone to form it were animated with this same desire to impress their moral and intellectual superiority upon their contemporaries."

Mrs. Broke was able to separate the combatants; and had to endure the lot which befalls those who undertake such philanthropic offices. Their forces were promptly united against her. With considerable fierceness and gusto was she fallen upon. Broke himself opined that she would do better to keep silent if she could not speak without levity. Lady Bosket considered that her sentiments were an outrage upon human nature.

"So they are, damn it, so they are!" said Lord Bosket with marked earnestness.

It is to be observed that this was the first and only occasion that our friend was ever known to confirm an opinion expressed by his wife. Misfortune makes strange bedfellows. During that harrowing week in December when elaborate precautions were taken to avert the burning of Buckingham Palace by a Boer commando which our press assured us was about to land at Dover, the lion of the desert and the domestic lamb lay down together.

Mrs. Broke was much too adroit to permit a state of

things that had welded all sects and classes of the community into a common bond of feeling to pass without making an attempt to utilize it for her private ends. A little later, when Lord and Lady Bosket had left, this eminent tactician turned to her husband.

"There is one circumstance, Edmund, that I feel you ought to know. Billy is at the Front."

Broke had the lethargic blood of many generations in him, but he checked his breath in the shock of the dramatic announcement. In a momentary spasm of bewildered pain, he held up his hand to stay the words of his wife.

"It is useless, Edmund. He is our boy, and you shall hear."

She moved between our hero and the door.

"You must not," he said in a hollow tone.

The weary impotence implied in it was a little piteous. Mrs. Broke, so far from being arrested by it, grew more inexorable. There was a latent sense of triumph in her. He had made an admission that her shafts were going home; her success put her in better courage.

"He enlisted as a trooper in the Rhodesian Light Horse. He has been promoted already to the rank of sergeant."

"Well?" gasped our hero involuntarily, in spite of himself.

"Well?"

They found themselves standing face to face, looking into the unrelenting eyes of one another. Both had refused to give back an inch. The close lips of the one, and the hard, short breathing and the convulsive breast of the other, who was the woman, told a tale.

"He is our boy," she said defiantly.

Our hero turned his back on her suddenly and completely: he had managed to recover possession of himself.

"Our boy, Edmund."

He walked away from her to the farthest end of the large room. She followed him up and took him by the sleeve of his coat. The courage she had received from his momentary confession of weakness was still in her.

"I will not be put off, Edmund. I insist that you hear, and mark what I have to say. Your boy, your son, is

serving his country in the manner that his fathers have done before him these many a hundred years. You shall not overlook that as long as I have a tongue."

She had surrendered her time-honoured rôle of austere woman of the world to the four winds of heaven long ago. In a speech of this tenour the urbane reserves of one who had posed so long as a high priestess of her distinguished order were far to seek. There was still, however, enough of the old habit of self-scrutiny left in her to cause her to wince at the thought that she was grovelling before a Juggernaut whose wheels were passing and repassing over her heart.

"He is expiating his offence, Edmund, in the service of his country!"

Our hero continued not to look at her, nor did he speak. The satisfaction was hers of noting, however, that if there was an arid vacancy in his face, there was a haggard weariness in his eyes.

CHAPTER XLII

Barbed Wire

THAT was not a fortunate Christmas for the family of Covenden. On the eve of the annual festival there occurred one of those incidents that do so much to irreconcile us to the conditions of tenure of our mortal lot. Wanton accidents intervene occasionally in the well-ordered scheme of life, for no better purpose, as far as our so-limited vision will allow us to judge, than the knocking down of our preconceived ideas concerning it. We cannot see what end they serve, what office they fulfil. We are made to bleed, yet know not the reason why.

The previous night and the early morning of the hallowed twenty-fourth of December had had a fog and a white frost. About ten o'clock, however, the fog lifted, and the sun made a gracious appearance. With it came Lord Bosket in very cheerful countenance, fully equipped for the hunting-field.

"Marvellous climate; two hours ago I would ha' laid a thousand to five there would ha' been no meet this mornin'. But you never know your luck, do you? The frost is givin' everywhere, and we shall be as right as rain by the time we are ready for a move. But I see you little fillies had more faith than I had. You've got 'em on already, and Edmund too."

"Father predicted it last night, Uncle Charles," said Joan, whose pride in that omniscient person was as inveterate as that of her sisters. "About nine o'clock he looked out and just caught a glimpse of the moon up the valley, and he said it would be all right for this morning."

Lord Bosket drank his whisky with an additional satisfaction.

"Wonderful eye you've got for the weather, Edmund. It's a gift. I can never read the signs like that, although I have lived in the country all my life, the same as you have. I believe these little gells have got it too. It's a gift, just the same as an eye for the work of hounds. You've all got that. I believe any one of you little gells would hunt the pack better than I could myself."

"Oh no, Uncle Charles," they cried in a flattered and delighted chorus. "That would be impossible."

"But you'd hunt it as well, what ?"

"Oh, no, Uncle Charles, we are sure we could not."

"I am damned if I am," said their uncle proudly. "There is not a hound in the pack whose note you don't know three fields off; and that you don't know what he can do better than I can. Why, if they were mute and you were in blinkers, I'd lay a thousand to five you'd tell every one of 'em by the patter of their feet."

"I believe they would, Charles," said their father, with an approach to his old fond and indulgent laugh.

Their father and their uncle were fulsome sometimes when they got upon this topic. They were just the type to appeal to such a pair of sportsmen. Their knowledge, judgment, and total subordination to the spirit of the all-absorbing business had conquered even the higher criticism, which is no more lenient to their sex in the hunting-field than it is in literature. They rode to hunt; they did not hunt to ride. Their appreciation of the abstruse points of the longest and most trying run would have done credit to the intelligence of the keenest and cleverest huntsman who ever carried the horn. They did not ride to hounds for the purpose of exhibiting the weaknesses of human nature. They were as full of tradition as the name they carried. They had the hereditary knack, improved to perfection—and in the hunting-field there is such a thing as perfection—by care, loving, ever-vigilant tutelage, and an infinite capacity for taking pains.

The result was the grand manner. Just as the prosaic art of writing conceived under certain skyey influences

and reared under special conditions may achieve a noble simplicity of style, the conduct of these sportswomen at the covert side had a similar significance. It was a case of art concealing art. There, as always in their daily lives, they were perfectly quiet and self-effacing, but the qualities that lay beneath that unemotional exterior came out to a degree that you would not have thought had an existence in such commonplace creatures. They obtained their successes so simply that less effective members of the hunt were prone to attribute their knack of living with hounds to luck as much as to judgment. Many persons could be cited in support of this theory who had *more* style, more dash, more horses and better, more ambition, in fact *more* everything, including a more visible determination to shine, who had served their apprenticeship to this particular country—and a mighty difficult country too—before these children were born, nay, who had even been in the shires. But at the same time they knew it was useless to pretend that they took anything like the rank in the eyes of the critics as that taken by these unprepossessing ladies.

"Broke, they are classics, and that's all you can say," was the verdict of General Paunche, familiarly known as "Hell-fire Harry," a purple-faced old ruffian, who, in the service of his country, had once commanded a brigade on Salisbury Plain, but who, in the service of Diana, had broken most of the bones in his body, including at least one in his neck.

What wonder was it that they provoked the enchantment and envy of their guardians? Their method was the perpetual theme of their father and their Uncle Charles. And to our hero, at least, it provided a mighty argument in support of his theory of the value of blood. "I should like to see the daughters of your mushroom people with their judgment of country," was a speech known to have fallen from his lips. And often enough, when riding home in the company of his brother-in-law, in the sore but ecstatic satisfaction of a punishing day, had he said: "Charles, what hands, what hands! They make a man feel like a bear performing on horseback in a circus. They can make horses talk. Genius, I call it."

"Damn it, they'd take a donkey over Leicestershire," their uncle would reply.

It may have been the approach of the Christmas season, that time of glad tidings and good cheer, which rendered them once again, for one brief hour, so buoyant of spirit and full of anticipation of the pleasures to follow. As they prepared that morning to set forth it was almost like old times. Thus far the winter months had been shorn of many of their compensations by the pangs of bereavement; and by the too-evident change that was taking place in their father, that first of comrades and friends, who, ever since they could recall his familiar and beloved figure, had been the most cherished possession they had had in the world. But this cold raw morning, mellowed a little by the tardy appearance of the sun, the total subsidence of the frost, and the consequent optimism of their Uncle Charles, the gloom was lifted from their hearts for the time being, and even their father seem infected in a measure by the prospect conjured up before them. Their fresh laughter was heard again for this one brief instant, their eyes were seen to sparkle to their uncle's praises; and presently they sallied forth, the four of them who now remained, in the company of their proud and indulgent guardians to meet Trotman with the hounds. Even their mother, who, as a rule, took an interest so perfunctory in their exits and their entrances, observed this manner of their setting out, perhaps a little thankfully, so greatly did it contrast with the gloomy quietude that had accompanied them all that winter.

Their mother noted it with a gleam of hope; with a gleam of hope that this was the beginning of a reversion to something in the nature of the old order of things, when their spirits were invariably high and their laughter infectious. It might be that, in the elastic fashion of youth, they were recovering from the tragic loss of Billy and Delia and the marriage of Harriet, which all that season had weighed upon them so heavily.

Strengthened by this thought, she went to her sitting room and surrendered herself to a stern conflict with Christmas bills. The unequal battle she had waged so long with importunate tradesmen still went on; and grew more unequal as it proceeded. Whatever the devices of

her wit or the suavity of her accents, they now declined longer to be put off. For years had she met them with an indomitable tact; but now she was forced to acknowledge that there was not another shot left in her locker. There had even been occasions when her wiles had been employed with effect upon the epistolary style of lawyers; but the accumulation of threats, fulminations, and stolid renderings of account that this morning she was called upon to survey filled her with a sense of the impotence of her struggles. They would have to be paid at once or they must submit to be sold up.

There was still, however, one asset remaining. It was the great fortune that had come in such a providential fashion to Billy. She felt she could count on his cooperation in keeping them afloat. At the last interview she had had with him at the cottage, immediately prior to his sailing for South Africa, he had expressed his deep gratitude to her for the services she had rendered to his wife. Even as she recalled this fact she was stung by the sordid nature of her thoughts, which in turn shaped themselves into the reflection that poverty is a most sordid and debasing thing. But, after all, she could hardly be said to be acting for herself. Were not all her efforts in the interest of her small community, and therefore on behalf of Billy himself? Thus at that moment, under the spur of a humiliating need, she supplemented the letter she had recently written to her son in the name of his wife, with a personal appeal for his permission to place some of the securities that now belonged to him to the use of the family of Covenden. That was assuming he was not already, in obedience to her summons, on his way home. They might be able to hold out if he returned at once; but if he did not, and if he failed promptly to transmit his authority, they would be compelled to sell the old place themselves, or submit to its being sold over their heads.

The composition of this letter gave her great pain. As she wrote it, not only was she possessed with the remorseless nature of Broke's resentment against his son, but also of his resentment of the miraculous source whence his newfound wealth had sprung. She felt the whole matter to

be humiliating and ironical. Therefore she wrote with a hurried copiousness that sprang first-hand from her nervous shame; and hastily enclosed her appeal without venturing to read a line of it.

In the afternoon she again addressed herself to the disentanglement of their affairs. She scrutinised accounts, examined bankbooks, and summed up in the explicit value of pounds, shillings, and pence all their sources of revenue. Unlet farms and the depreciation of agricultural values told too sad a tale. Without the assistance of poor, despised old Mr. Breffit, the very queerest god that ever came out of any machine, the tottering edifice that had braved time for so long must already have fallen down. She was indomitable, but even she was compelled to give in before such a marshalled army of facts.

She was still poring over these documents in the last hour that remained of the grey winter daylight, when she was startled by the sounds of a horse galloping along the carriage drive. Almost immediately she caught a glimpse of a horseman flying past the window of the room in which she sat. A little bewildered, a little disconcerted by an incident which struck her as decidedly unusual, she waited rather uneasily for its development. In her eminently practical mind there was no effect, however odd, that had not an intimate relation to cause. Therefore she had already anticipated the appearance of the butler when he came to her a minute later, somewhat in a hurry, it would seem, for one of his majestic leisure.

"What is it, Porson?"

There was a keen anxiety in her tone.

"One of the second whips is here and wishes to see you, ma'am. I—I think something has happened."

"I will see him. Will you please bring a light?"

By the time Porson had re-appeared with a lamp and the room had been invaded by a breathless, overheated and muddy presence, Mrs. Broke had a clear prevision of the worst, and was prepared to support a recital of it.

"I hope it is not a fatal accident."

Her decisive air frightened the bearer of the news. That distressed rustic had ridden in a fever of anxiety, and all the way had he laboured under the stress of his

instructions. He was to go as fast as he could, yet at the same time he was to break, as far as possible, the tidings of misfortune to Mrs. Broke. He had not revealed a word of his errand as yet, but it would seem that already she knew what it was.

"No, ma'am, not fatal as yet."

"Which?" she asked, numbed as by a blow.

"Can't say, ma'am; they're all alike as peas; can't tell t'other from which. But it is one of the Miss Brokes, ma'am; although Dr. Walker says you was not to be alarmed. But you was to have a bed made up for her in the libr'y at once, although you was to be sure and not be alarmed. They'll be here in a bit."

Without waiting to hear further details, Mrs. Broke rang for the housekeeper.

"If you have any of those small hospital beds in the house, Mrs. Smith," she said, "let one be brought down. If you have not, please improvise one with mattresses near the fire."

"How far have they to come?" she then asked the bearer of the news. "Do you think they will be long?"

"Well, ma'am, they've got a good three mile. It happened yon side Raisby. And they'll be slow, I reckon, as they are having to carry her."

"Is she unconscious?"

"Oh yes, ma'am."

"Broken back?"

"No, it's her 'ead, ma'am, her pore 'ead."

The bearer of the tidings burst into tears. The composure of Mrs. Broke seemed slightly inhuman by comparison with his agitation.

"Do you know how it happened?"

"Barbed wire, ma'am, that there barbed wire. Dr. Walker says it's murder. The pore hoss come down and broke 'is back, and they do say, ma'am, the pore young lady pitched on 'er 'ead, and the pore hoss afterwards rolled ov-ver 'er. I didn't see it myself, and I'm thankful I didn't, but that's how it happened, so they says. It was the end of a hard day, you see, ma'am, and I daresay the pore hoss would be weakening a bit, and was not able

to allow enough. But Dr. Walker says it's murder, ma'am, and beggin' pardon, so it is. His lordship's about out of his mind."

The grim anticipations in the heart of the mother had been borne out by this grisly narrative. The pleasure the inadequately educated derive from the recital of misfortune is very great. Accidents to them, particularly if they seem to have a chance of being reckoned as fatal, are as the flower of the mind. So do they cherish them, so do they take them to their hearts, so radiantly are they invested in their charmed imaginations that even the most irrevelant details—and in such cases there are only too many—are consecrated by the dark shadow of death. The tendency of the second-whip to pile horror upon horror, most of which he had acquired second-hand from equally fervent *raconteurs*, had to be checked.

Presently Mrs. Broke went to superintend the arrangements in the library, if only to escape further unnerving commentary. In her heart, however, there was no hope. The resolution still remained to her of setting her face steadfastly against all species of self-deception, even at those times when the spirit seems no longer capable of sustaining its burden. A sure instinct, as powerful, as irrefragable as the tide of events that was crushing her and hers to the dust, led her to apprehend the worst. There was no reason to assume that the malevolence which had presided over their affairs during the last twelve months would seize an occasion of this kind to relent. Cruel as she judged the nature of the accident to be, the strain of fatalism that misfortune upon misfortune's head had recently induced in a mind formerly so wholesome, formerly so sane, convinced her that the reality would prove equally, doubly, trebly as cruel. It was too plainly identified with that which had been pursuing them. Only too well did she recognize the Hand whose frequent pleasure it had been of late to strike out from the shoulder with the fist of a butcher for the purpose of knocking a defenceless woman to pieces.

The library was soon set in readiness against the time of the arrival, and afterwards there was nothing for the shattered woman but to await.

"Do you know which it is, ma'am?" said the housekeeper.

"I do not."

"I expect it will be Miss Joan."

"Why, Mrs. Smith, do you think that?"

"If you happen to cherish one or think the least little bit more of one than you do of another, that is the one that is taken."

"Have you not uncomfortable theories, Mrs. Smith?" Mrs. Broke smiled wearily.

"Very, ma'am. I suppose I have picked them up in an uncomfortable school—a school where you get your knuckles rapped while you are acquiring them. I could never see why the moment a thing takes root in your heart, you should have it plucked out again. I suppose it is the self-indulgence."

"An uncomfortable philosophy, Mrs. Smith."

"Very, ma'am; but it is part and parcel of the uncomfortable life we lead in this uncomfortable place."

"Do we not aggravate it by our complaints of it?"

"You are right, ma'am, I daresay. But your endurance is not for everybody. We are not all so strong and wise. I hope the day will never come, ma'am, when your endurance will be broken down. It will be taxed though."

Mrs. Smith, a discreet and sensible person as a rule, shook her head in the manner of those hard-eyed seers who peer into the future by the light of the past.

The period of waiting was sore. By an exercise of the will, Mrs. Broke returned to her accounts, and tried to grapple again with those daunting documents that also told so hard a tale. The more closely they were examined the more clearly did disaster reveal itself. Ruin was made the more visible, the more actual. But even that had little power over her mind now. Her labours had become perfunctory. Every time the fire creaked in the grate, or the cold wind swung the branch of a tree against the window, she lifted her head to listen. The suspense made her ache.

At last her alert nervous ears caught a confusion of noises up the drive. She could hear the slow and muffled sound of many feet tramping through the crisp air of the

evening, which had already begun to freeze again. She could also detect a murmur of low voices. She went back to the library to bestow a final glance upon the preparations that had been made, and then went out again into the hall, where the upper servants, several of whom were bearing lights, had been already marshalled near the entrance doors. The old butler had had both thrown back wide, and was standing pale and white-haired out in the portico. The rays from the lamp he held in his hand made the tears look like quicksilver as they hopped down his face.

Broke, Lord Bosket, Dr. Walker, and three of the girls were the first of the mournful procession to come into view round the ivy that covered the angle of the outer wall. One of them, Jane, was bearing an old and battered bowler hat, with a broken brim. Mrs. Broke went out to meet them. Her brother was the first to pass her.

"Which, Charles?"

Lord Bosket, hung his head limply, and got through swiftly into the spacious dimness of the house. As old Porson's lamp fell on his puffy red face, his sister saw that it was in the same condition of visible emotion as the butler's. She touched her husband on the shoulder.

"Which, Edmund?"

Broke, without glancing at her, strode quickly into that spacious dimness too.

"It is Joan, mother," said Philippa in a calm voice. "She is not dead."

"Dead? Oh, dear no, nor anything like it!" said Dr. Walker in a tone of rough re-assurance.

The red-faced old family practitioner, who would have been the first to allow that he knew far more about the art of riding to hounds than he did of the profession of medicine, turned to Mrs. Broke in his abrupt, gruff way that yet had an odd tincture of kindness in it which seemed to have no right whatever to be there, and amalgamated no better with his general demeanour than does a lump of sugar in an iron tonic.

"Dead! Of course not. An unlucky Christmas for you, though. I hope I shall not come across the man who put up that wire. Ought to be hanged."

By this time a number of the members of the hunt and one

or two of the hunt servants had arrived at the portico with a strange burden in their midst. It was a farm gate, to which had been added a mattress taken from a labourer's cottage, and on the top of it was a scarcely visible something covered by coats and blankets. The doctor superintended the introduction of this odd form of litter into the hall. It called for the very nicest care to get it through the various doorways and past the many awkward angles, which too palpably had not been designed for the reception of such clumsy and unwieldy things. Nor was it easy to get it across the tiles and rugs of the interior itself, or to avoid contact with many articles of furniture. The doorway of the library proved peculiarly difficult to negotiate, and at first it was feared that the task of entering would have to be abandoned. In the end, however, it was overcome, and it said much for the skill and devotion of those who conducted the operation that not once was their burden allowed to jar against the all-too-narrow woodwork.

Once inside, the mattress was lifted bodily on to the improvised couch in front of the blazing log fire, the hurdle was removed, and the wearisome labours of these friends were at an end. They retired to the hall to await events. Mrs. Broke left the doctor alone in the library to make a fuller examination than he had been able to do in the field. In the most ample manner did she retain her self-possession; saw to it that the considerable muster of anxious people who had flocked into the house to obtain more definite news had tea and other light refreshments served to them; and personally thanked the bearers with her customary grace.

Soon afterwards she returned to the doctor in the library. He had concluded his fuller examination, and was now seated at a table writing out a telegram.

"Will you tell me precisely what you think?"

Dr. Walker took a huge handkerchief out of his scarlet coat, and mopped his red face with emphatic deliberation.

"Got a dog's chance," he said gruffly; "and when you've said that you've said all. I should like MacLachlan."

"By all means."

"I am wiring. Better send somebody with it to Cuttisham—no office nearer—and tell them to put the best leg first. Better take a bicycle. Every minute counts."

Mrs. Broke went immediately to execute these commands. When she returned the doctor was standing by the side of the couch looking intently at the form stretched upon it. By a supreme effort she was able to go to his side. The coat by which Joan had been covered was withdrawn; and she lay extended full length on the mattress, with her hunting tops protruding below her habit. The grey pallor of her face was in deadly contrast to the appearance of ruddy health that was ever to be seen upon it. It was relieved a little by a dark splotch of dry blood beside one of her ears. Her eyes were closed, she was quite still, and the only evidence of life remaining in her was a sound of loud, hard breathing that could be distinctly heard. Her mother did not flinch, although in her veins was a strange, numb nausea, as if she had suffered that instant the heavy stab of a knife. Standing before that perverted image of what once had been her eldest daughter, she cowered in an extreme anguish of the spirit. It was a moment that tears fibres out of the heart, and leaves a wound in that centre of emotion which not even time, the assuager and replenisher, not years, not forgetfulness, can allow to heal again.

"Just struggled back into what you might call consciousness," said the doctor.

"We must have patience, I suppose; I suppose we can only wait."

At the sound of those mellow, familiar tones, it almost seemed as if the closed eyelids lifted a little, as though sudden light had fallen upon them.

"Can't move without MacLachlan."

"How long must we wait?"

"If everything goes right he might catch the 7.20 from Paddington. He should he here in four hours."

"Four hours!"

The indomitable woman gave a dismal shiver.

"If we are lucky. If we are not lucky he may not be here before midnight or nine o'clock to-morrow morning."

" Surely there is some one else, some one more certain, some one nearer at hand ! "

" No, not for this. It is MacLachlan, or nobody."

" You told him of the urgency ? "

For the first time that evening the sorely tried woman was showing signs of pressure. They were slight enough, but she had to put forth the effort to correct them.

" Ha ! here's Harris," said the doctor. " I sent to Cuttisham for Harris. He cannot do more than I have done already, but I thought I'd have him."

The door of the library had opened to admit a benevolent, white-headed, double-chinned, heavy-watch-chained, hand-rubbing old gentleman, who bore on every fold of his ample black-coated person the unimpeachable evidences of the family physician of the highest possible standing. Every step that he took was accompanied by a purr and a creak. He is said to be peculiar to a bygone generation, and only to exist now in the remote country places, and the recondite pages of fiction. He owed his eminence in the local estimation not so much to the nature of his intellectual gifts as to the perfection of manner he bore to the bedside. It was based partly on a facile sympathy, and partly on a sound working knowledge of human nature. The number of occasions on which his name had made its appearance in the wills of deceased old ladies of the neighbourhood was supposed to have long precluded his practising his calling as a means of livelihood. For years the illusion had been cherished that he followed it for human pleasure.

He tip-toed across the carpet and bowed to Mrs. Broke with the deferential grace of a high priest among courtiers.

" Cchk, cchk," he said, clicking his tongue against the roof of his mouth. " Cchk, cchk, Walker, what have we here ? "

" Fractured base," said Walker, in a gruff undertone.

" Very sad, Walker, very sad."

Dr. Harris glanced for a moment at the face of the loud-breathing sufferer, and then, placing his hands behind him, marched with his colleague to the extreme end of the room. They were seen to stand there together for some time with great solemnity. Their demeanour was very grave, dignified, and impressive. It was of a character to indicate that

they were engaged in conversation of a highly erudite and technical kind. What passed between them was this—

Dr. Walker: "Wired for MacLachlan."

Dr. Harris: "Just so."

It seemed to Mrs. Broke, however, that all the resources of their infinite learning, wisdom, and experience were being brought to bear upon the matter, when in two words they had concurred with one another. All there was left for them to do was to await the arrival of the great surgeon from Portland Place. If she lived until that time something might be attempted, and there was still that hope for her. But, one way or the other, they had perfectly open minds, and were by no means prepared to speculate upon the chance.

For about an hour Joan lingered in a condition that might be called by the name of consciousness, and then came another relapse into complete oblivion. Her mother alone remained in the room with the two doctors. She felt the suspense to be eating into her like an acid; while impatience seemed to be cutting her mind into shreds. Everything depended on the arrival of the London surgeon; but the tardiness of telegraph wires and railway trains could not summon him to that room under four hours at the earliest. The slow ticking out of the minutes on the clock soon became intolerable. She turned to Bradshaw, the guide, the solace, and the despair of so many that Christmas Eve, to look out, for her own satisfaction, the trains from London. But no mitigation was provided of that terrible term of four interminable, heart-teasing hours at the earliest.

She began to chafe at the inaction of the two doctors. Were they not at the bedside already? It was as much as she could endure to reflect that Joan lay within an arm's length of them wrestling for very life in the clutch of her extremity, while they did not lift a finger to yield her aid. Probably it was going hard with her, because of some slight succour that was withheld. The torment of such a thought was more than she could suffer. The four hours seemed as far off as four years. The conviction began to press like a dull load on her heart that to live through that unending period would be impossible for her, herself, let

alone for Joan. She seemed to have passed through a lifetime already since the telegram was sent, but it made rather less than forty minutes on the clock. More than three hours had yet to go; and then it might be that after all he would miss his train. Was it too much to ask that some outward, some visible effort should be put forth to detain her dying eldest daughter against the time of the surgeon's coming?

"Can you do nothing?" she said at last, with a suspicion of a groan. "Surely the time is so long that she may die before the surgeon comes."

"We can hope," said Dr. Walker gruffly.

"For the best," chimed Dr. Harris with a creak and a purr.

The one blew his noise vehemently at this point, and the other folded his hands on his stomach.

"Freezing again," said Dr. Harris presently, stretching his hands towards the blazing hearth.

"I don't know about that," said Dr. Walker. "I think it means snow."

As he spoke he walked to a window, drew aside the heavy crimson curtains, and looked out upon the night.

"Snowing hard," he said. "Coming down in a sheet. I thought the tail of that wind meant mischief. I have tasted it before at Christmas time. I suppose they call it seasonable weather."

"Will it delay the trains?" said the mother, breathing close.

"Possibly," said the gruff Dr. Walker.

"Possibly not," said the suave Dr. Harris. "Possibly not we will hope and trust."

Dr. Walker replaced the curtains and made his way back to the fire to warm his hands.

Mrs. Broke was no longer able to stay in the room. As she went out into the hall, and was in the act of shutting the library door cautiously behind her, she was met by the drawn face of the old butler.

"Any change, ma'am?" he said in a scarcely articulate voice.

"Practically none."

Broke was sitting in the darkest part of the hall. Some

distance from him, in the middle of a lounge before the wide hearth, Lord Bosket was seated too. A profound silence enwrapped them. Broke was supporting his chin with his hands, and was staring into vacancy with a perplexed look on his face. Lord Bosket had his hands stuck in his pockets and his head lying back on the cushions, while his muddy breeches and boots were toasting before the huge wood fire. Alternately he seemed to be shedding tears and to be imbibing whisky and water. The rest of the people had gone away.

Broke did not speak, nor did he lift his face from his hands at the approach of his wife.

"A damn nice Christmas for us," said Lord Bosket with half a grunt and half a groan.

Mrs. Broke made an effort to speak reassuringly. There were no visible evidences permitted to her, however, of her success.

"I knew they were both done as soon as I saw 'em go," said her brother.

"They have sent for a surgeon from London. If she lives till he comes they think something may be done."

"No need, my gell, no need." Lord Bosket began again to shed tears softly.

All this time Broke had not moved, and he did not appear to have listened to a word that had been spoken.

The girls were hanging about in a corridor in the manner of their kind. They were still hatted and booted and in their habits. Their faces were scared, but unemotional, and one and all preserved the intense silence of their father. Jane still held the hat with the broken brim. They seemed to suggest so many sheep huddling in a furrow, and waiting for the black storm to burst upon their heads that the winds have gathered. They were hardly enlightened enough by life to be aware of the precise nature of the mysterious thing that was about to befall them. They had been pushed to the extreme verge of their intelligence; beyond, into that immense and awful void of the unknown, they did not seek to peer.

Once out of the room, Mrs. Broke found she could not rest until she was back in it. She returned to find that things had suffered no change. The doctors were still

seated in front of the fire conversing in under tones exactly as when she had left them. The slow minutes continued to pass without incident, and with all the power of her nature she strove to resign herself to their tardiness. The only respite to the inaction and monotony was when first one doctor, and then, perhaps half an hour afterwards, the other, rose from his chair to take a glance at Joan. Once or twice Mrs. Broke drew aside the curtains to look at the falling snow. It was still being shaken out of a dense heaven in silent, persistent flakes. The ground was covered as far as the lights from the bright room struck out across the lawn. The thickness of the fall, already considerable, could be gauged by the layer that was poised on the branches of a tree which pressed against the window.

Thus the slow-drawn hours passed. Life remained in Joan, but not once could she be said to flicker back into an interval of consciousness. After some three hours had followed the sending of the telegram, Dr. Walker lingered in one of his excursions to the side of the bed, and by a slight movement of the head was observed to summon Dr. Harris. For some time they stood together looking down intently, and making slight inaudible comments to one another. Afterwards they resumed their places by the fire.

Although Mrs. Broke could understand nothing of what was passing between them she hung upon the inscrutable expression of their faces. Feverishly as her eyes traversed them, she could not learn.

"No change?"

"No change," they said.

"Do you think *now* she will live until the surgeon comes?"

"The chances favour her as she has held out so long."

She then went out to make arrangements for the surgeon to be met at Cuttisham station. Lord Bosket rose immediately to go himself.

After that half an hour passed in silence, only broken by the stertorous breathing of Joan. One of the doctors took out his watch.

"He should be here in twenty-five minutes if he caught the 7.20, and the snow and Christmas traffic have not de-

layed the train. I trust a carriage has been sent to meet it."

"Lord Bosket went half an hour ago."

A muffled knock came to the library door, and the old butler entered on tip-toe with a telegram addressed to Dr. Walker.

"It is not to tell us he cannot come!" said the mother, breaking once again the fine-drawn thread of her self-control. The next instant she had it pieced.

"Arrive Cuttisham 8.31.—MacLachlan," the telegram said.

"Oh, if he could not have come!" was wrung out of her.

She who for four mortal hours had suffered the torments of suspense was now afflicted with an excitement that was like a vertigo.

"If the train is punctual they must be almost here."

She turned to watch the movements of the clock on the mantelpiece.

She began to count the seconds as they passed. But the hands moved round so tardily that she soon found it impossible to keep her attention riveted upon them. If only to forget them for a space, she left the room again. She went out to the man who still cowered mute in the darkest part of the hall, and who for four hours had not taken his chin off his hands.

"The surgeon will be here in a few minutes, Edmund. Here is his telegram."

Abruptly, but without speaking, Broke rose to his feet in a rather aimless manner, almost as if galvanised into life by the slip of pink paper in her hand; and then as his wife returned to the library he followed at her heels. The way in which he accompanied her implied that his consciousness of the act was no greater than that of a somnambulist.

When they entered together Mrs. Broke saw that both doctors were standing side by side and bending over the couch. One was holding Joan's wrist, and the other, stooping over her, was watching her face with minute intensity.

"Mrs. Broke"—she heard her name.

In much the same manner that the prisoner at the bar

hears the foreman of the jury utter the sinister word "Guilty" did the mother hear her name pronounced. Her soul fell into stupefaction, but its paralysis was not extended to her limbs. She moved to the couch, with Broke following her mechanically, instinctively, like a dog. She did not dare to look at the pair of impassive men before her, but forced herself to pin her eyes on the face of her eldest daughter. A scarcely perceptible flicker was emanating from it, hardly so much as that of a match that falters in a draught for the fragment of a second to flutter out. To know whether the sealed eyelids twitched or whether they were still was not possible, for she saw everything through a dancing red haze like harsh midsummer heat trembling above arid country. The cold face, the colour of putty, seemed to be a little convulsed; the chest sank. The fact slowly spread over her inadequate senses that the loud stertorous breathing was no longer to be heard.

"Joan!" and then a little eagerly: "Joan, speak to me!"

There was not a muscle living to respond. She continued to look at the face with a far-off comprehension of the incomprehensible. Presently she drew her eyes away dully to confront the doctors. They had turned away. Broke was standing by her side. His face was grey. In the crude lights of the lamps and those of the ever-blazing hearth, his pale hair stood forth the colour of snow. She placed her hand on his sleeve authoritatively, and led him away a few paces in the manner that a mother leads a child.

At the far end of the room the door was seen to open. The old butler's small hoarse voice could be heard to sound through the silence like the croak of a frog across a swamp.

"Sir Peter MacLachlan."

A very tall, thin, sandy-haired man, with a pale red complexion peaked with the cold and empurpled round the nose, lips, and ears, emerged briskly out of the darkness beyond the lamps. For his reputation he looked remarkably young. He was accompanied by an older, better dressed, more prepossessing man, who carried a small hand bag.

Dr. Walker came forward into the middle of the room to meet them.

"We are much obliged to you for coming, Sir Peter," he said, heartily shaking the hand of the youngish man with the sandy hair, "but you are just a minute too late."

"Hum," said the great surgeon with a pronounced Highland intonation, "then I suppose we'll be off again. We can catch the 9.40 if we hurry."

CHAPTER XLIII

Ad gloriam Dei et in memoriam Brokeae

ON Christmas morning a pilgrimage was made to the churchyard of Covenden to choose the last resting-place of Joan. It was in keeping with the new order of things, an indication of the spirit of the age, that Joan was not to repose in the company of her forebears in the church itself. It was believed that she was the first Broke of Covenden dying at home in all that long tally of a thousand years who was not committed to the enormous vaults of the sacred edifice. She was to lie in humbler fashion in the God's Acre under the common sky. It was in deference to the wish of her mother that her eldest daughter should open a new era in the history of her name. It was a concession partly to science, partly to convenience, to common-sense, and modern notions.

The little church could not go on for ever with fresh tablets added generation after generation to its walls. Every available inch had been crammed with these memorials many a year ago. The tombs beneath had long been groaning. Warriors and statesmen Brokes were there from the time of the Plantagents. Simple rural Brokes were there as well, obscure and pious countryfolk, whose claim upon their race was embodied in the fact that with an unostentatious excellence they supplied the links of its transmission. But Brokes illustrious and Brokes unknown to song and story, whose highest flights of conduct did not soar beyond the amiable Christian virtues—every wearer of that talismanic name was secure when he returned whence he came of his niche in the sacred building that, as a signal mark of condescension in a great and noble

family, was dedicated equally to the glory of God and the house of Broke. *Ad gloriam Dei et in memoriam Brokeae.*

Joan was to lie in the open air she loved so well. It was not hers to have the privilege of reposing cheek by jowl with her mediaeval forefather who lay with his lady by his side, clad in complete mail save for the lifted visor that showed his face, with his sword clasped to his breast in his iron fists, and his crossed feet resting on his faithful hound, the emblem of loyalty—effigy of a Crusader returned from the wars in Palestine, image of a Paladin. It was not hers to lie with her less martial ancestor of the age of Elizabeth who knelt to face his spouse in an attitude of prayer, with his sixteenth-century jerkin cut to simulate the hauberk of the distinguished knight his neighbour, although he had no more warlike accomplishment than a bible on a pedestal. Nor was it hers to lie with her more fanciful kinsmen of the Georgian period who allowed a poetic licence to dictate the panoply of death; who endeavoured therein to combine the Augustan age with that of the Second Stuart by placing periwigs upon their heads, buskins on their legs, and as a last embellishment laid over all the toga of the ancient Senate House beside the Tiber.

Could our hero have consulted his own wishes, his eldest daughter would have lain with these. To his mediaeval spirit the laws of sanitation had no appeal. In a matter of this sacred magnitude common-sense was for the service of the common people. He would have been the last person in the world to let it come between tradition and pride of kindred. He would have had science and the public welfare yield with humble and thankful hearts to the honours the illustrious dead were able to bestow, by their proximity, upon him and his. But that morning the bruised and broken father was in no condition physically to carry his point. Mrs. Broke, in the name of the Twentieth Century, prevailed over the Eleventh. Our hero, even with all the contained passion of his mediaevalism, had not the tenacity of purpose to resist.

Therefore Broke, his wife, and the three children still left to them, set out on Christmas morning in the company of the head gardener to the little churchyard to choose six feet of sepulture. Walking up the steep slopes, their

road took them past the cottage inhabited by Billy's wife and her aunt. Already that morning Mrs. Broke had had the consideration to have them informed of the tragedy of the previous evening, in the hope that the stroke would be less severe if design and not chance made it known. The door of the cottage was shut, the blinds were pulled down, and there were no signs of either the old woman or the young.

The churchyard, hanging on the face of the hill, sloped at an angle of thirty degrees. The small church itself seemed to rise sheer behind the gates. This, however, was an optical illusion, as it was separated from them by a moss-grown path of considerable length. As the little procession slowly ascended it there could be heard people at worship within the sacred precincts, uplifting their voices to the strains of "Hark, the herald angels sing!" in recognition of the joyful character of the occasion.

Their way to the piece of ground they were seeking led them past the entrance porch. As they came near, the worm-eaten oak doors slowly opened to emit the louder notes of the organ, and the fervent rustic voices in a lustier strain. Two women were passing out of the church.

They came full upon the sombre pilgrims, who by this had reached the level of the church door. One of these women was very young; the other very old. Both were clothed heavily in mourning. They were clinging to the arms of one another, and one at least appeared to be overcome. But the sounds of distress, if sounds there were, were wholly lost in the joyful clamour proceeding from the sacred house. The elder woman appeared to be receiving succour of the younger, who was leading her away. Their faces struck out with the vivid pallor of the snow that pervaded the grass, the trees and the graves. Mrs. Broke stopped to detain them. And at the same moment she laid her hand on Broke's coat in a decisive manner, with a quick, unmistakable determination to detain him also.

"This is Billy's wife, Edmund," she said, making the physical attempt to draw him towards the child who, with horror in her eyes, was clasping the arm of her aunt. But the peremptory solicitude of her tone went for nothing.

Broke, without irresolution, without casting a glance at the two frightened women, firmly disengaged himself from the grasp of his wife, and passed on round the angle of the porch. With the same absence of hesitation his daughters followed. They had heard the words of their mother, but their gaze was riveted on the form and bearing of their father. His way was theirs.

When Broke and his daughters had passed out of sight, Miss Sparrow was able to suppress the overwhelming emotion the music had called forth. She bobbed her eternal curtsey and found the courage to speak.

" The music was too dreadful, ma'am; I could not help thinking of you, ma'am, and what you must suffer this Christmas morning. The season makes it so much the harder. It is a cruel, cruel Christmas for you!"

" I hope my message did not shock you too much."

" It was very kind and considerate of you, ma'am."

All this time the pale child had been looking at Mrs. Broke dumbly.

" How are you, child, this beautiful wintry morning? You are wise to get as much of the pure out-of-doors air as you can."

Alice continued to look at her with unfaltering eyes.

" I have been thinking," she said in a deliberate voice, " that perhaps it is better that some one shall be there to meet him in case I am not."

" Who, child? And where?"

Mrs. Broke was disconcerted by the matter-of-fact tone, and all the more because for the moment she was at a loss to apprehend the meaning of the words.

" I mean my husband," said Alice, with a deliberation that gave Mrs. Broke a sensation of faintness. " His sister is there now, and he is on the way, as also am I."

Mrs. Broke recoiled from the calm voice. She turned to the aunt.

" You must really see that she takes more fresh air, Miss Sparrow."

" I would like to be buried in this old churchyard if I may," said Alice, " so that I can be near the place in which he was born, and lived in longer than any other. I may, please, may I not?"

The mother was not strong enough this morning to be able to endure these morbid fancies. Rather precipitately she left them and went round the church to rejoin Broke and her daughters. They were discovered in a secluded corner of the churchyard where, in a space hedged about by bushy firs, a spot had been chosen by her husband and the gardener as Joan's last resting-place.

CHAPTER XLIV

Mother and Daughter

FROM that Christmas morning Mrs. Broke went every day to the cottage on the hill. As the time of her son's wife drew near she seemed instinctively to recognize, rather than by the processes of reason, how the prospect of a new generation of their name was fraught with a strangely vital meaning. She had not told Broke as yet. Indeed, she hardly dared to do so in the face of his present bearing. The tragic death of Joan had appeared to tighten rather than to relax his heart. It seemed to have become congealed; it was as though the blood in it was changed to ice. He was of the type that adversity embitters and renders wanton.

In the midst of this new concern she did not seek to dissemble the fears that came into her mind when it reverted to the frail young wife. Alice's prepossession that something was about to overtake or had overtaken her husband grew more intense as the days passed. So powerful did it become that the nearer her ordeal approached so did the desire to survive it seem to diminish.

One morning, in the early days of the New Year, Mrs. Broke was hastily scanning the newspaper after breakfast, and, as usual with them of late, her eyes turned first to the grimmest of all the grim columns in it: that which set forth the fresh list of casualties to hand from the seat of war. Many aching and dim and sick eyes were to look upon it that morning, as every morning, but few more shudderingly than those of this bereaved woman in the awful desolation of her heart. In a few incredibly short

months three children had become lost to her. And such was the state of despair in which she was sunk now, that she, too, was haunted with the prepossession that the sum of her misfortunes would not be complete until her only son was taken from her for ever, definitely and effectually. She had the conviction—such was the nadir of the spirit in which she found herself now—that Circumstance would leave no means by which she might escape the consummation of her sorrows. As long as her son was alive the hope remained, however faint it must seem, that one day he might be given back to her. Circumstance, however, had merely to write his name in that list in the *Standard* newspaper to rob her of that remote hope of consolation, of mitigation, and put it out of her reach once and for all. It was hardly likely that Circumstance would deny itself in this small particular, when so easily it could gratify its lust.

It was hardly likely that having contrived so much, it would hold its hand now and refrain from making a harmonious whole of its recent handiwork. Every morning did she turn to that grisly column with the same conviction in her heart. Her religion was founded on a certain practical sagacity, and it informed her how insulting to the conditions under which we enjoy our mortal tenure was such a prepossession. But philosophy fails to touch us when we feel the knife. Besides, when we are bleeding to death we may grow too faint to apply the remedies our minds prescribe. Far down in her heart the heavy and repeated blows upon that centre of emotion had told their tale. There was there a gangrene, the outward and visible sign of these ghastly bruises. Her fancies were growing as morbid as those of the child at the cottage. She could not see a gleam of hope. Circumstance had her bound to its rack, and such was its humour that it would seem every bone in her body must split.

This morning of mid January she turned as usual to the death roll with shuddering eyes. It was a refinement of torture that although she was denied the solace of hope the intolerable pangs of suspense were not on that account allayed. Circumstance had the ingenuity of a Grand Inquisitor in the bestowal of pain. Yet its inevitability

did not soften the morbid horror of receiving it. And this morning she had not read far down the page when her eyes were arrested by an item which at first seemed to wear an air of distant significance. It said, "Rhodesian Light Horse, No. 3013, Sergeant W. Broek (?), Killed in action near Schnadhorst's Spruit, January 2."

The number was the first thing which challenged Mrs. Broke's attention. It corresponded precisely with the one she carried in her brain. From that she went on to the other particulars as set forth, and all too soon her last doubt had passed. Even the ill-spelt and queried name became a part of a harmonious whole.

Perhaps the fact that struck her most forcibly at first was a certain irony underlying the announcement. The capacity of the individual for physical suffering was already past its highest. The repeated blows under which she had staggered had somewhat numbed her. As one stricken with a mortal disease may not have the same susceptibility to pain as a perfectly normal and healthy frame, so Mrs. Broke had already gone beyond the stage of her keenest anguish. Her son was dead; but it was a calamity she had foreseen. It was only another link strictly essential to the chain of events that was winding about them. The last of an imposing line, enshrouded in many centuries of tradition, had perished as an obscure common soldier in a skirmish in a remote land. With Sergeant W. Broek of the Rhodesian Light Horse their name was at an end.

She had not the courage to go to her husband and tell him then. There was the probability that he had been tried already to such a degree that, as was the case with herself, the power of realisation had been rendered blunt, but at this moment it seemed to verge on the inhuman to thrust upon him that which at present had been withheld.

A little afterwards, when the nature of these tidings assumed a sharper outline in her mind, the four walls of the room in which she sat began to contract. It was as though they were crushing her body until she could no longer fetch a breath. Her senses were still sufficiently normal to be aware that it was the merest illusion; that

fact notwithstanding, however, she rose and went to another room. In a little while the effect was repeated there. A craving came upon her to go out of doors. There was something in her that demanded a freer, more spacious air.

Once out-of-doors she was invaded by the necessity of making her way to the cottage at once. The future might depend entirely upon that. It was absolutely essential that the news contained in that morning's newspaper should not come to the notice of the wife. It called for no common hardihood for her to go to that place there and then, but once again a bitter need had made her strong.

When she came to the cottage door, Dr. Walker was departing.

"Ha! Mrs. Broke, I wanted to see you. I have ordered her to keep her bed. I think it wise; and I must be sent for at the first moment."

"Have you an idea when?"

"This evening most probably."

Mrs. Broke then put a tentative question to the doctor as to whether he had seen anything of a special interest in that morning's newspaper. When he said he had not she drew the sheet containing the announcement out of her cloak, and asked him to read the line on which her finger was placed.

"You don't mean to tell me that is our poor boy?"

"Yes," she said in a firm voice.

There was a moment in which the doctor betrayed some agitation. He then peered hard at her. Her fortitude struck him as very remarkable.

"I feel for you very much," he said in a quavering tone. "You have had a lot of bad luck lately. And the poor father? He must be dreadfully cut up."

"He does not know yet."

"I think you will be wise not to go out of your way to let him know. And, of course, the child upstairs must be kept in ignorance."

"Indeed, yes."

"Of course it goes without saying as far as you are concerned. But the question arises whether we shall be able

to keep her mind quiet. She appears in a sense already to know."

"Is it advisable to tell Miss Sparrow?"

"She seems a sensible old woman. As for the nurse she is a veritable dragon of prudence, in whom you will find a great ally."

Mrs. Broke passed into the cottage to find this veritable dragon of prudence replenishing an india-rubber hot water bottle from a kettle on the hob. She was an apple-cheeked creature of the countryside, sufficiently severe of years and mien, an autocrat of the bed-chamber, accustomed in the pursuit of her calling to exact the obedience and even the homage of all sorts and conditions of men and women.

"Good morning, ma'am," she said without pausing in the operation she was conducting.

"Good morning. May I go upstairs?"

"No, ma'am, not this morning. She is too excited. I would not have let her aunt go up, only she is so used to having her about her, that it might have unsettled her more, ma'am, if she had not been able to see her."

"How is she this morning?"

"I am not pleased with her, ma'am. She is feverish. And she has taken the notion that her husband is dead, and that she is going to die too; although, for that matter, they are all alike in that respect. But this notion she has taken of her husband's death looks like making it very awkward for us. She seems firmly to believe in it, although it is all a flam, no more than a fancy."

"On the contrary, it happens to be perfectly true."

The nurse nearly allowed the hot-water bottle to drop from her hand.

"You don't mean to say, ma'am, as how our poor Mr. William is dead?"

"The news is in this morning's paper."

"I am sure, ma'am, I feel for you very much. It is terrible hard for you and Mr. Broke, and so soon after poor Miss Joan. I am sure, ma'am, I sympathise. And poor young lady, say I, she is right after all. We might well not be able to get it out of her head. But how could she have known that? It is strange, ma'am, the things they do know sometimes. It is just like poor Mrs. Pearson,

who knew her husband was drowned hours before they brought home the body. And here's her auntie and I been a-telling her it was all stuff and nonsense; and it actually turns out to be true. I don't remember anything more wonderful than that."

At this moment Miss Sparrow was seen descending the stairs, bearing an untasted cup of milk in her hand. At the sight of Mrs. Broke sitting below, she stopped half-way in her descent to drop her invariable curtsey to her. Custom had rendered it so precise that she was able to perform it without spilling a drop of the milk she carried.

Mrs. Broke greeted the old woman with the marked kindness of tone she never failed to employ to her.

"I have bad news for you, Miss Sparrow," she said a little while afterwards, "but I know you have great courage."

"I will try to have, ma'am," said the old woman nervously.

"Our fears are realised. My son has been killed in South Africa."

The old woman stood perfectly rigid, perfectly upright, with her bony arms folded on her flat bosom.

"Two in a fortnight, ma'am. I don't know, ma'am, how you have the mind to bear it. My heart bleeds for you."

There was an extraordinary pity in the tone that touched the mother. Such a solicitude directed to herself she found to be infinitely more unnerving than an outburst of woe.

"It is hard to say 'Thy will be done,'" said the old woman in a contained voice.

For some little time she seemed either unwilling or unable to apply the bearing the news must have on her own affairs. But at last she broke forth quite suddenly, in a voice that was like the squeal of a hare that has been hit—

"My Alice! My Alice!"

The idea appeared to have struck her in all its astonishing force for the first time.

"The news must be kept from her at all costs," said Mrs. Broke, shaken with pity.

"Not for long, ma'am, not for long. Not for more

than a day or two at the most. Already she knows in her heart."

"I fear she does, poor child."

Silence came between them again until the old woman spoke once more, this time with a brevity that transfixed the listener.

"Sentence of death, ma'am, for Alice!"

Mrs. Broke's conviction of the truth of this statement was so clear that she was not able to make an attempt to console her.

"She is my all, ma'am," said the old woman, without passion and without tears. "She is all I have got in the world. I shall not be able to bear the loneliness when she is taken. She is my everything; I have nothing else. It would have been a great kindness for God not to have left an old woman in the world entirely alone. Still, I must not complain; it will not be for long. He knows best, I suppose; but, all the same, it would have been a great kindness to an old and lonely woman had He taken her first."

The old woman pressed her skinny fingers, coarsened and blackened with a lifetime of toil, against her flat chest. Her shrivelled frame remained erect, and as gaunt in its rigidness as the arm of a windmill. But the furrows of her face, the colour and consistency of parchment, did not reveal a single tear. She was like a dry stick in which a drop of sap could not be expected to exist.

"It seems hard," she went on with the same absence of passion, "that the poor young gentleman should have been killed just when that great fortune had come to him. If it had come to him a month or two sooner Alice would have been saved. He would not have needed to leave her then, and she would not have died. But 'God moves in a mysterious way,' as the beautiful hymn tells us. I am an old woman, ma'am, but all through my life I have noticed that things are always falling out in a way that you cannot understand. A little bit here and a little bit there, and all would have been changed. I suppose it is that God does not always go the straight way to work, lest we should get to understand His ways too well, and presume upon the knowledge. In the end it is best for us, I sup-

pose, human nature being weak and what it is, but, at the time, it is apt to seem hard. If that money had come just one short month or two sooner two beautiful lives would not have been sacrificed; and you and me, ma'am, and the poor father and those poor dear sisters would not be feeling that the light of their lives had gone out."

"It is to teach us poor women the gospel of patience."

"There are times, ma'am, when it almost seems that you cannot be patient any more."

"If ever women cease to be patient there will perish the only hope remaining to the world," said the bruised and broken lady, speaking for her sex with the mournful conviction of a seer.

Thereafter a merciful silence came between them once more. Speech lost its adequacy. They were traversing uttermost abysses that could bear no spoken record. In their ways of life they diverged as widely as two persons could; their lots had not been cast in the same plane; but here habits and conventions had no meaning. They were a pair of women who felt the pinch of life in a perfectly similar fashion. As one individual they moved through the same noisome darknesses to look at death. Every yard they went, the one holding on to the other, with the same eyes they saw the same things.

In this nadir of the spirit in which they were lost the cottage door was opened, and a small female figure came upon the threshold. It entered the little room with a quiet, assured step. Suddenly it stopped, and a harrowing irresolution might have been seen to possess it. At the sight of one seated in the room, the visitor a woman, a young and very small, in deep black draperies, not only stopped abruptly, but so great was the hesitation that had come upon her so suddenly, that a visible reaction was produced. Step by step she retreated backwards to the cottage door.

Mrs. Broke, who was seated with her face towards it, had not taken her eyes from those of the old woman when the first sound of the lifted latch had crept upon her ears. It was not at first that the indecision of the person who had entered was rendered to her absent senses, which were so far away from the trite facts that were being evolved

out of the mundane. No sooner was she conscious, however, of an additional presence in that little room, than she looked up to learn to whom it might belong. It belonged to Delia.

The first shock of mutual recognition past, mother and daughter grew sensible to find themselves peering towards the haggard faces of one another, as through the mists of that immense gulf that had opened between their lives. In a manner they had the wonderful sense of illusion that befalls the climbers of the Brocken when confronted with the spectre of themselves upon the opposite mountain. Mother and daughter were of one flesh, but as, slightly stricken with horror, they peered towards one another, an immutable law of time, space, and physical being appeared to hold them apart. Their likeness one to the other was almost weird, their flesh and blood was identical, but the sensation afflicted them that they could never come to stand nearer to one another than they stood now.

This feeling, however, was only paramount in Mrs. Broke in the first excitement of recognition. It seemed to make less than an instant in her brain, although in point of actual time it must have made many. No sooner had the pale proud image of her youngest-born been cut into her senses by the unerring chisel of kindred, than she rose to her feet with a cry.

"Delia!"

There was no room in her already submerged heart for the question of a loyal attitude to Broke to enter it, while so much as one thought of private animus was impossible. All things were merged in the cry of her maternity.

"Delia!" she cried, and ran to her daughter with arms outstretched, and her face racked and precipitated into the veriest unreason of emotion. Running to her daughter, she gathered the unyielding form against her bosom and pressed her lips fiercely upon her cheek. They found it dead. Not a nerve in Delia responded to the call. The horror of the discovery was like a douche of cold water suddenly flung at the face of the wretched woman. She recoiled with a shudder; her teeth seemed to clap in her jaws.

"Delia!" she cried for the third time, and now under the dominion of terror.

Delia did not yield a breath to her mother's cry. Her chin was raised, and her vivid eyes were looking steadily past her to the wall beyond, on which was nothing more human, more significant than a grocer's almanac.

"Delia," said her mother, feeling her knees beginning to give way. "Have you nothing to say to me? Have you no mercy to give me? If you have not, I—I do not think I can endure it."

Far away in her consciousness there was the echo of the speech her brother had reported as having fallen from the child's lips in relation to the conduct of her father. "God may forgive him, but I never will!" These Brokes were not light of utterance. It had come upon her at the time, and now the fact returned upon her with a grinding pang, that for one of their women to permit herself a speech of that nature implied not only the ample conception of all that it meant, but also the implacable power of will to vindicate the words. As the bereaved woman recoiled from her daughter with that freshly-recalled phrase in her heart, the conviction was driven through every artery of her being that she was lost. The fact that she was about to be spurned like a dog by a child she had borne would in her present condition prove too much.

"You cannot mean it," she said, without her senses recognising one of the words she used. "You cannot mean it. You do not know what you do. You do not know what you do."

The voice and face of the mother touched no chord in the daughter. She still regarded the picture of Father Christmas printed in five colours of naïf garishness on the wall before her eyes. And the eyes were as wide, as concentrated, and the wonderfully drawn line of her mouth was as firm as on those occasions which had struck so much disconsolation into her Uncle Charles during the period of her flight to London.

"I am not guilty," said the mother. "I had neither art nor part in your father's act."

Again the beaten woman hardly knew the words she used. And in any case the admission was wrung out of the very depths of her faithful spirit. It was the only

occasion in her life that openly, by word of mouth, she repudiated an action of her husband's. It tore her in pieces as it was, but that statement had to be made here and now, if she were not miserably to perish.

"You suppressed a letter."

Delia answered her mother in the melancholy voice of a judge.

"I confess it. But that action was taken in the conception of your interests. It may have been mistaken, it may have been wrong, but I say it before God that my motive was worthy. I cannot bear that you should visit my errors upon me in this manner. I cannot bear it; whether I acted rightly or wrongly, that you should judge me is more than I can endure. Have you no pity for the mother who has never had a thought apart from the welfare of you all? Have I served you from your first hour with the brightest blood of my heart, that you should spurn me now and cast me off like a dog?"

Delia stood as tense as death and as cold. In her face there was not a spark of compassion for the woman she was crucifying with her silence.

"God forgive you your hard heart," cried the felon upon the tree. "God forgive you your stubborn pride!"

"You had no pity for another," said Delia, in a voice capable of the utmost deliberation of selection. "He was poor and he was defenceless. I do not think you deserve to be forgiven."

The mercilessness of such words helped the mother to regain her self control. With it returned her power of will. An inflexible determination to prevail was born in her. She must prevail, or in the attempt perish. She pinned her daughter by the arm in a firm grip. Suddenly the furrows of her face were moulded in stern lines.

"I am innocent. Delia, I will compel you to pay that justice to me. I am innocent; and I summon God to be my witness. You shall not cast me away. My acts may have been mistaken, but they were not criminal. Here and now you must, you shall receive back into your heart the mother that bore you!"

Rag by rag every stitch of the clothing of convention that our civilization demands shall be the garb in which a

finished woman of the world shall inhabit her decency, was being torn off the poor lady. The woman of ineffable wisdom and mastery would be naked all too soon. Even now there was scarcely a clout left to cover her shaking limbs. Dignity, reticence were gone, fortitude was going. Naked and bleeding, she was prostrating herself before the feet of her daughter, who, so far from being revolted by the spectacle, continued to gaze upon it with unflinching and perfectly remorseless eyes.

" *You* had no mercy. Do not ask it of me."

"I do, I do! I demand it! You shall extend mercy to—to your mother."

She gripped the unresisting wrists so tightly that the print of her fingers was marked on the tender network of veins and white flesh. A slow and cruel smile began to creep out of Delia, the peculiar weapon of one woman when she seeks to slay another. It seemed to open a vital artery in the victim.

" You force me to my knees," she gasped.

The last rag was torn away. She was entirely naked now. But not for an instant did her judge avert the gaze that was devouring her with its scorn.

" Gentle God, this is a Broke—this is not a human being!" cried the mother.

An intolerable pang took Delia in the breast. Without a groan she strangled it and continued to confront her victim.

" I hold your guilt to be the equal of my father's," said the melancholy voice of justice.

" You shall not. O, my God, you shall not!"

The implacable eyes of the two women suddenly clashed together. The shock of their meeting was produced by a contained but vivid fury. As when two blades of a steel of an equally choice temper are crossed in a duel to the death, it is left to the mightier, the more righteous cause to gain the mastery, it was with a knowledge of the exisence of such special conditions that this unhappy pair contended now. Both the wretched women had this consciousness when their implacable eyes recoiled from the faces of each other. Right must turn the scale; truth, *justice* be the arbiter.

" Delia, I challenge you to prove the truth of that which you assert."

" You suppressed a letter."

" My motive seemed entirely worthy to myself."

" You took me away that afternoon."

" I had no cognisance of what was about to happen."

" None whatever, mother ? You had no foreknowledge of any kind of what was about to occur ? "

" None."

" You swear it before God ? "

" Before God I swear it ! "

The bleeding and naked woman, the woman of ineffable wisdom and mastery, of unconquerable will, covered her face with her hands in a spasm of very shame. It was too much to undergo this literal inquisition at the hands of one she called daughter. But all their lives these children had never learned to trust her. It is impossible to certain natures to have implicit confidence in that which they cannot apprehend. And she had never taken the trouble to interpret herself in lucid terms to these women that were her daughters, in terms that could place all their doubts concerning her at rest. Now she was being punished ruthlessly for that omission. Her assurance that throughout their lives her one thought had been for their welfare was not enough. Delia demanded the proofs.

" You will believe me, Delia," said her mother in a voice that had long ceased to be her own.

The barrier of a lifelong reserve, of an unremitting reticence was broken down.

" You shall believe me, Delia."

Again she gripped the limp wrists with all the strength of which she was capable, a strength that to herself seemed great enough to break them. She raked wildly the dismal but unresponsive eyes to find a trace of that mercy of which the denial could only be interpreted as death. She bent her face towards the mouth that could not pity.

" You will believe me," she repeated again and yet again, and forced yet nearer to her daughter's a face which also had long ceased to be a part of her identity.

Delia met it with a look of impotence. Suddenly on her side she began to rake it with the awful candour of

her gaze. Not a corner in which deception might cower did she leave untraversed. Her dismal but mute eyes explored abysses in that wonderful face which never before had had a meaning for them. The unplumbed depths they found in it were marvellous indeed. Even in the act Delia grew conscious that this was a wonderful face into which she was looking. But her work must be carried through. The grey hairs of her mother, the hollow cheeks, the sunken eyes, the wildly trembling lips were alike traversed by an inquisition dreadful, inexorable in its candour. Not once, however, did the victim quail. Her will enabled her to stand there to support the vivisecting eyes of her daughter without so much as a contraction or dilation of the pupils of her own, notwithstanding that the tribunal of her spirit had announced that she must share the guilt of Broke. And by sheer resolve she forced her daughter to concede that she had spoken the truth.

The breath of both issued from their dry throats in the hard and audible manner of Joan when she lay dying. Delia then proceeded to press her lips slowly and gravely against her mother's forehead.

" I believe you, mother," she said, gathering the broken woman in her arms.

CHAPTER XLV

A Short Essay in Anticlimax

THEREAFTER Mrs. Broke and her recovered daughter sat a long hour together in the intimacy of a common sorrow. Delia was spending a few days at Cuttisham with her husband at the house of his father. That morning she had seen the announcement in the newspaper of her brother's death, and in the same way as her mother had been able more clearly to identify him by the number attached to his misspelt name. Before he went to South Africa she had given him her promise that she would keep in touch with his wife. She had been as good as her word, inasmuch that she had corresponded with her regularly. And now, under the stress of this tragic event, she had been able, not without a struggle, to overcome the repugnance she had to setting foot once more on her father's land. The impulse to make a pilgrimage to the one for whom her brother had forfeited everything, even to the laying down of life itself, was too great. Her promise became a sacred duty now that he was dead. It was demanded of her that for once she should waive the bitterness of her personal thoughts. At whatever cost, she must go to his wife and offer her the consolation of one who had been very near to him and very dear.

She had heard of Joan's death also through the newspaper, that harsh and crude medium. To her intense desire to be present at her burial she did not yield. She felt that her presence at the graveside might cause inexpressible bitterness to every member of her family. And

as far as she herself was concerned she was aware that the adoption of such a course must mitigate her resentment in some degree. That final insinuation of her pride fortified her sufficiently to enable her to stay quietly in London.

The barrier once broken down between mother and daughter, their re-established intercourse was peculiarly frank. Now that Delia had been persuaded of her mother's guiltlessness, she did not hesitate to establish her for the first time in her life in her confidence. For the first time in her life she had dared to pluck the mask from off her face. The surface beneath was a revelation. The awful being was flesh and blood, a woman and a mother. And in any case there could be no half measures with Delia now. It was the signal honesty of her nature either to reject or to accept. With her there could be no wish father to the thought, no slurring over of hard facts, no pretences, no lip service, no attempts at deception of herself. She had taken inordinate precautions to satisfy herself that her mother was innocent. Once that fact was rendered clear she admitted the broken woman to her arms, and talked to her as a daughter to a parent fainting under the relentless strokes of fate.

"Do my sisters know about Billy?" she asked, after this re-established intercourse had gone on some time.

"No, alas! nor does your poor father."

"They must be almost crushed, poor children. How lonely, how inexpressibly lonely and lost they must feel without Joan; and then Hat too is gone away. What dear happy days we all had together once. One short year ago we had yet to taste the flavour of life. I think, mother, we have all tasted too much of it since. I at least am not the shy little timid girl I was in those days, that now seem ages and ages away. I am very greatly changed, and you, too, mother seem very much changed. Perhaps it is that my eyes are not the same. But what dear, dear days they were! Oh, those sweet winter mornings when we all used to go hunting with poor dear Uncle Charles!"

"And your poor dear father," her mother interposed with sunken eagerness.

"I remember Joan was always our leader—dear, high-

hearted, fearless Joan. What a great soldier she would have been had she been a man ! "

"It has made your poor father very aged," said the mother with a wistfulness that was almost timid. " Perhaps you will hardly guess how tenderly he has loved you all. Perhaps you will hardly guess what an inveterate pride he has had in you. You have meant more to him than life itself. I believe he would have laid it down cheerfully rather than a hair of your heads should meet with injury. He will never be the same man again. I think it would shock you to see how white he is."

Delia did not respond.

" It is hard," said the mother, with a gentleness that was still timid, " for us women sometimes to understand how men look at life. I think, my dear one, we ought never to judge them, because of the difference in our natures."

" They judge us."

There was something in the quality of the words that started the blood running cold in the veins of the mother.

" I do not think they judge us harshly," she said.

" They have been known to commit crimes against us in the name of justice."

" If that is so, my dear one, are they not the more in need of our forgiveness ? "

Delia's eyes were like stone.

" Alas, alas, my dear one ! "

" Should they not first seek a true conception of the quality of justice, before they dare to inflict it upon us ? "

" But, never, never let us forget our prerogative of seeking the true conception of forgiveness, that even more sovereign quality."

" Let them gain it for themselves, mother, before they turn to look for it in us."

" It is a terrible attitude," said the broken woman. " I do not see what hope there can be for us wretched humans as long as such ideas obtain. Is this all the civilization of which we boast amounts to ? I wince to hear such words from the lips of a woman."

" Are we not as man begets us ? " said her daughter, with pain and despair in her eyes. " Are we not his clay ?

If the sire is a wolf must he look to have issue of the turtle-dove? If there is that within the spirit of man, which, unchecked and even sanctioned by his heart, mounts up in him until he is become a beast, shall not such a crime against our human nature recoil upon him?"

"Alas, there spoke a Broke."

The reproach was wrung out of the unhappy woman. Too clearly did she recognize the seed whence sprang that speech. The mediaevalist of the twelfth century must not expect to have issue endowed with the higher tenets of society. The wanton nature of his daughter's words again caused the chill to spread over the mother's veins.

"How can there be a hope for the world, my dear one, so long as we perpetuate in our own hearts the evil inherent in the hearts of those who have gone before?"

"Is not man the all-powerful instrument? Does he not fashion us according to his will? Does not his nature enable him to mould us in his own image? Is it not, mother, through him and only him that progress and enlightenment can come?"

"No, no," said the older woman, taking the hand of her daughter in her own, and caressing it with a softness which yet had such an anxiety in it that, even as she spoke, she seemed to be peering up, word by word, into the young face, pale with its anguish, to remark their effect. "No, no; is it not worthier to believe that the regeneration of the world is with us? Is not the idea more endurable that by our courage, by our patience, we redeem the grosser clay. I feel sure that nothing can be done for Man except by Woman. Must we not lead him before he can walk? And if nature has not designed us to purify and to replenish, why does she make us bleed?"

"Is it not what we have been saying to ourselves for our own comfort, our own vindication, from the beginning of things? But man does not seem to grow less brutal. He continues to strike us to earth, and we continue to grovel and fondle the hand that makes us bleed. I cannot feel that any humane end is served, unless it is to enable him to practise his lusts in security."

"Oh, my poor child! My poor child!"

The eyes of the mother filled with tears.

"Oh, I know, I know! There is a poison in my veins."

In her anguish Delia rocked her body to and fro.

"Is there no such thing as strength within you, my dear one?"

"What strength I have cannot cleanse my blood. The stealthy poison taints me; how you do not know."

"Perhaps I do, my lamb."

"No, you do not. You cannot; *your* blood is too sweet, too pure. I am powerless. The terrible forces at work within me are too great."

"Much may be done by prayer."

"Alas, I have no faith!"

"You must never forget that we women, we wives and mothers, are chained to the oar of the galley. That fact must supply our faith, must teach us how to pray."

"Oh, I know you are right!"

"Yes, I am right. We are brought into this world in a state of subjection and captivity. We cannot put off our fetters, we cannot call ourselves free. Be sure Nature understands that. Be sure she is never tired of making *us* understand it."

"If I am chained to the galley the fetters are of silk that bind me."

"They are fetters, child, none the less. And if they be silk you will find them so much the harder to break. Fetters of silk can only be tied by honest and brave men round the wrists of true and good women. But once they are on they are far more inviolable than those of the clumsier, more arbitrary steel. There is no evading that kind; they are the most tenacious of all."

For the first time the load of pain seemed to lift slightly in Delia's eyes. Her mother was looking at her all the time with a weary furtive anxiousness. In an instant she seized her opportunity.

"Think of your husband," she said, "and then tell me that you will forgive your poor father."

"No, no, I cannot."

But there was a new vibration in the voice that was unmistakable.

"You would be shocked to know how broken he is and aged."

"I do not fear, my dear one," said her mother; and now something of the old calm sauvity of voice seemed to be returning, as in the very throes of death a certain placidity of the spirit may arise. "I do not fear. And when my request has been made and has been granted to me I shall turn to you to fulfil your part as truly as your husband will have fulfilled his."

Delia was seen to clasp her bosom, while her eyes were darkening. The beads still continued to shine in the livid furrows of the mother's face, but there could be no misinterpretation of the expression that was come upon it.

"I do not fear," it said, as staunchly as could her lips.

CHAPTER XLVI

The Last Battle

MRS. BROKE left the cottage a short time afterwards to attend the family luncheon. Delia, apprised of what was shortly to occur, had expressed her intention of remaining in that place until the more immediate crisis at least was passed. She promised her mother that she should be at once informed when the nurse sent for the doctor.

Mrs. Broke's first act on reaching home was to despatch two maids to the cottage to augment the forces already gathered there. In these high and grave periods the resources of any establishment are apt to be taxed.

At the luncheon table were seated Broke and the three daughters remaining to him. As yet none of them was cognisant of Billy's death. The problem immediately before Mrs. Broke was the most fitting manner of acquainting them. The task must prove exceedingly painful; and nothing but the inexorable demand made by events so rapidly precipitating would have induced her to undertake it in her present state. Even as she sat in the midst of them at the table, and in lieu of partaking of food, meditated upon the subject, she came to the conclusion that the actual necessity only applied to Broke himself, and that for the time being her daughters could be left in a merciful oblivion.

No sooner was the meal at an end than she asked Broke to grant her a brief private interview.

"I will hardly detain you, Edmund, more than a minute or two."

Her tone was intended to imply that she wished to speak with him on a plain matter of business. Accordingly they entered the library together. Their feet once again on that old battle-ground, where so much of their blood had been left already, she did not fence. She had no longer the nerve. She must speak at once, else the power would desert her. No longer was she the perfectly balanced, the beautifully strung woman of affairs whose emotional nature was in entire subordination to the will. To look at Broke as he stood before her now, and to recall what he was a few brief months ago, was to be conscious that she was gazing upon the ghost that was herself. His hair might be white, but hers was white also. For every line in his face, the parallel was to be found graven in her own.

"I will be brief, Edmund. Billy is dead."

The white-headed man remained upright and serene, except for the hardly perceptible stoop that had insinuated itself so recently in his nobly spreading shoulders. There was not a faint sign of perception visible in his seared face.

"He died serving his country. He was killed in action on the second of January."

Broke made no reply. Not a fibre twitched.

"His end, as I conceive it, is a fitting termination to your name. He is the last of you. Your name dies with him; and I do not think there is a Broke of you all who could have devised that it should perish more fittingly. The last of you gave his life for his country. That is an ample requiem, even for such a race as yours. Edmund, even you will admit it."

He remained before her upright and unspeaking. She gazed upon the piece of stone before her with something approaching a return to her old baffling, ironical smile.

"He was your son; also the last of your name. However you may seek to dissociate those two facts, those two crude facts, they must remain linked permanently. It may seem to you a little grievous that they should be so, but such is the case. He was your son; also he was the last of your name."

Each word was charged with a relentless precision. They might have had bitterness had they been less im-

partial, they might have had passion had they been less coldly wrought.

Broke still remained before her mute.

"Have you not a word to say, Edmund? Have you not a word in which you can answer me?"

His answer to her was a walk of a mechanical weariness out of the room.

The remainder of the wintry afternoon had for her that strange concentration, that indescribable material density, as though time itself had become embodied in every pulsation of the heart, of the last four hours of Joan's life on Christmas Eve. She could neither sit nor lie; she could hardly stand still; and to be perpetually walking about did not satisfy her long. She could not write nor could she read. She went up to her bedroom to attempt sleep. It was withheld sternly. Thereafter she buried her eyes in the pillows, and in her extremity tried to pray. The action seemed to have lost its virtue.

Throughout these intolerable hours, the need haunted her of preserving her sovereign intelligence unsullied and intact. If once it faltered, or fell short of one iota of the whole force of its mature strength, she knew that she was destroyed. Now that, after all these long years, the time was at hand when the very highest demands were to be made upon the endurance of one old and poor woman, she was possessed with harrowing doubts of its adequacy. At other periods in her life it had been found more than equal to all emergencies. In every trial it had stood triumphant and foursquare. It had prevailed even in those seasons when momentarily the spirit had seemed to be unseated. Never until now had she been afflicted with a doubt of its quality.

Now, however, she was invaded by an unnerving distrust. That morning at the cottage she had an evidence that the first safeguards of the inmost citadel and sanctuary, the barrier of her reticence, had been unhinged, had been thrown down. A breach was left gaping in her defences, and it must be repaired. All that afternoon she bent her energies upon the task. Not a hole must be left unfortified in the ramparts of the beleaguered city. Not a joint or a fissure must be in her armour through

which a stray arrow might pierce to the consecrated thing that lay beyond. For, in spite of all that had gone before, she knew that the really decisive contest had yet to come. And if she entered into that ordeal with one weak spot in her suit of mail, some pitiless shaft would seek it out, and she, weak woman, would be overthrown and slain. Hour by hour she laboured to repair that breach in the outscarp occasioned by the breakdown of her reticence. Like one possessed, she laboured. With a strenuousness but a very little this side dementia, she wrestled to recover what she had so recently lost. Without her reticence there could be no battle. It was the weapon which all her life she had been accustomed to employ. It was the talisman that hitherto had enabled her to conquer every time she had been engaged. The mere possession of it was a source of strength. Divest the poor woman of her reticence, and you cut off Samson's hair.

The encounter with her youngest daughter had stripped her entirely naked. A fear was now growing up in her that the gods, not content with stripping off the clothes of her civilization, might dare to palter with her reason. Pray Heaven they would leave her that! If, in the stress of her superhuman task, a moment of weakness or faintness overtook it, all was lost. There was the work of a Titan before her. Let a nerve, let a muscle, let a vein in her overdriven brain fail to respond to the call, and the Giant with whom she had to grapple would fling her to the dust, and press her life out with his heels.

The task that confronted her must have daunted all save the indomitable. The irreconcilable had to be reconciled. If she yielded her life up in the attempt, this Amazon among women had made the pledge to her maternal spirit that Broke should admit his son and daughter back into his heart. It would seem that she must meet that grim feudal Titan in the arena and wrestle with his prejudices until they or she had yielded up their clay. The woman and the brute, the indomitable and the savagely implacable, would have to interlock their gnarled limbs, and the woman, by her natural might, must cast the brute to earth. It had come at last in

the end, as all along it had threatened to do, to a question of fibre. It would be a struggle of sheer physical power. The broken woman might well have fears for the too great strain imposed upon her by such conditions. But the contest was not to be shirked: the idea of defeat not to be borne. Failure must result in death, or for that so-faithful spirit something worse.

Hers was an eminently practical nature; exquisitely matter-of-fact. In her anxiety to maintain her strength unimpaired for the work before it, she turned to the medicine chest, where a nature more emotional would have had recourse to religion. Afterwards, she endeavoured to surrender herself to the period of inaction that was now intervening, the time of a comparative peace antecedent to the great and final conflict, with a patience more in keeping with the original majesty of her character. She changed her morning dress, and went down to afternoon tea in the drawing-room. Mercifully the privilege was vouchsafed to her of being allowed to take it alone. There were no callers; the girls were not about; and Broke's scorn of the effeminate beverage was monstrously, proverbially masculine.

She drank three cups, and failed in the essay to eat half a slice of wafer-like bread-and-butter in spite of the fact that not a crumb had crossed her lips since eight o'clock that morning. She took up a novel of Tolstoy's in French and tried to re-read portions of it chosen at random. She found she could not. She opened volumes of Balzac and Schopenhauer taken haphazard, but one and all bearing an acute relation to human life and illuminating sidelights on the stress of it. Their success was no greater. Literature was become a poor, an ineffectual thing, when called upon so imperiously to mitigate her vital agonies.

Between six o'clock and seven, her own maid, who had spent the afternoon in doing duty at the cottage, appeared in the drawing-room in her cloak and hat.

"Miss Delia sent me to tell you, ma'am, that the doctor has been sent for."

"Thank you," said Mrs. Broke, rising and laying down her book. "Will you please fetch me some things; and

will you also inquire whether Mr. Broke is in the library?"

"Mr. Broke *is* in the library, ma'am," said the maid, returning a little afterwards.

As the maid helped her into her cloak Mrs. Broke said: "You must eat some food, and go back to the cottage as soon as you can."

She then went forth to her last battle. Broke was discovered seated at a table writing letters. As she entered the room he looked up at her and was then seen to pause in his occupation to bite his pen vaguely, as though something had suddenly passed out of his mind which was very important should remain in it. He was about to resume without speaking a word, when she said—

"I am sorry to interrupt you, Edmund, but I would ask for a minute or two of your attention."

He laid down his pen and rose from his chair in a fashion of mechanical weariness. As he did so she took care that the road to the door was barred effectually by her sombrely spreading presence.

"I give you my promise, Edmund, that this is the last occasion on which I shall make a reference to a distressing subject. On that ground I ask you to give a patient hearing to what I have to say. You will?"

He stood without one evidence of life in his face. His silence was complete.

"Answer me, Edmund. You will?"

The tired expression in his face seemed to deepen, but he did not reply.

"You must, Edmund, and you shall. There is one essential thing you should hear, and hear it you shall. It is this——"

He made a sudden attempt to get past her to the door. She stepped quickly in front of him, and held him with two cold but firm hands on the breast of his coat.

"It is not for you and me to descend into the merely futile, Edmund," she said in a voice that had a far-off suggestion of a superhuman laughter in it. "What I have to say is this: they have just sent to tell me that the wife of your son lies at the cottage on the hill with child.

And I hasten to inform you of this fact, because I conceive it to be my duty. You are the one person whom it more immediately concerns. Your only son is dead, but you will recognize that, after all, your name may not be extinct. I now ask of you that you accompany me to the cottage to ascertain for yourself the fate that is reserved for that which is more to you than anything else in the world."

These inflexible words were rendered in something of the conscious manner of a peroration, but all the while she was speaking she never took her haggard eyes from those of the man before her. But he did what he could to avert his own. He still stood motionless and perfectly erect, except where the massive shoulders were a little bowed as by a succession of loads that had proved too heavy for them to bear. But there was not a sign of comprehension to be detected in him.

"For you to remain insensible to all that fact means cannot be. A son may be born to your house this evening, and in that event the very loyalty to the name you bear will compel you to acknowledge it. The very pride of kindred that will not allow you to relent will in that case force you to do so."

Again she strove to peer into the hidden eyes.

"Setting personal bias apart," she went on in a voice in which the note of emotion had been suppressed rigorously, "let us put the matter on the higher plane of an impersonal practical wisdom. Do you not see that if that one event happens you will be compelled to submit? Would it not be more politic, do you not think, to recognize that fact before it comes to pass? Is it not due to yourself that you yield of your own free will rather than at the dictation of Circumstance? Consider it, Edmund, in that light. Consider how essential it is to make that concession here and now. It is to save yourself."

Broke continued dumb. No sound interrupted the long minute of silence that fell between them. His wife then altered her tone. It acquired a note of pity, it assumed a tinge of irony.

"My poor, dear man," she said gently, "can you not see how futile your own puny efforts are when you oppose them

to Fate? To persevere one hour longer in the attitude you have taken up is to go headlong to your own doom. You forget that you are not a mythical character, able to mould your destiny according to your will. To the trades-people of Cuttisham you are the squire of Covenden; to your friends and neighbours you are a person of an unimpeachable respectability; you are a symbol of Aristocracy in the conventional sense; but to the God of Heaven or the Pagan Deities or the General Force you are no more than any mortal of them all. What can the devices of our wretched so-limited flesh avail when they are face to face with their consummate powers? One stroke from the paw of Circumstance and you are prone. Do you suppose, my poor, dear man, they do not mock at you? Do you think They do not deride you to death when you set up your miserable, ineffectual will against Theirs? If there is still a sense of proportion remaining to you, I implore you to exercise it. Exercise it while there is yet time. Before this night is over I believe that the power of volition may no longer be yours."

Broke remained a statue. Not even words of mockery such as these could break through the wall of his impassive muteness. From first to last he did not move. The unhappy woman, knowing it to be the last interview they could ever hold together on this subject, continued to press this final opportunity. She was losing her last momentous battle, nay, her sick spirit told her she had lost it already, but she must go on. From mockery and derision of him she passed to all the arts and devices of perfervid appeal, mounting presently to the weird violences of passion, afterwards to return to a cool, defiant, superhuman self-control. She spoke with a serenity of selection, a concentrated discretion of phrase which proved that in this, its last extremity, her mind retained its powers undaunted and to the full. Argument, solicitation, menace, cajolery, appeals to his dignity, his intelligence, the welfare of his race, her own long and faithful services on his behalf, suggestions of policy and expedience, indeed, every weapon her overdriven wits had in their armoury she dared to employ and did employ with a directness that was unsparing. But from first to

last he stood a veritable rock. Not a word crept out of his locked lips. The hue of death was upon his face, the inanimation of it was upon his heart.

However, she supported this passiveness with absolute fortitude. Her qualities were not tested in vain. In her hour of supreme need they did not desert her. Like those of the truest of her countrymen, they would not allow her to admit that she was beaten, defeated, overthrown, long after that fact had appalled her spirit. On and on she struggled breathlessly, sickly, blindly, with a dogged valour, long after her aim had lost its concentration and certainty. The inevitable loomed ahead, a dark and grisly bulk, but to submit to it was impossible as long as there was a drunken stagger left in her limbs. And when weak, when sobbing for breath, when despised and broken at last, she foresaw that the mere limitations of the flesh were about to conquer her, she said finally, with hardly the same degree of control in her voice, and with something perhaps a little overwrought in her demeanour—

"Edmund, there is one word more. If a son is born to your house this evening I would have you remember that he inherits a fortune of some two hundred and seventy thousand pounds. Do not forget that the will of old Mr. Brefitt is made in his favour. And I ask, are you so blinded by your own arrogance that you do not distinguish by the light of that circumstance that a sardonic agent is presiding over your affairs? I ask you, Edmund, do you not detect a certain irony in the fact that you, the arch-despiser of the vulgar and the sordid, you, the high priest of the cult of blue blood and virgin aristocracy, should be condemned to have the very existence of your house depend on the contemptuous benevolence of such a one as the late Mr. Breffit? That two hundred and seventy thousand pounds will intervene to save us all from ruin, and in the event of a manchild being given to you to-night, will secure to your heirs throughout generations yet to come something of the former affluence of your race. Edmund, I implore you to yield. Do you not see that Circumstance is gibing at you? Do you not see that you are become a sport

and a plaything of High Heaven? Have you yet to learn, my poor Edmund, that whenever these Immortals spy out an inherent baseness flourishing in the rank soil of our human souls, they gloat upon the sight and smack their chops? Give in, poor Edmund; renounce the damned thing lest they mock you to death.

"For the last time I beseech you to come with me to the cottage now. Accept the unhappy creature you have despised before you are made to do so by that inexorable Force that is deriding you. Put away your blindness, Edmund, and forgive your son who has lain this fortnight dead—before you are made to do so miserably upon your knees. And there is another child, an outcast from your heart, whom you will be compelled to reinstate. Can you not see that it will be more consistent with the native dignity of your nature if you do these things of your own choice? Do not tarry until a manchild is given to your house. If you do, it will become a weapon to compel you to obey. I speak for the last time, Edmund; I can speak no more."

She ended with flushed cheeks and many signs of purely physical distress. She trembled violently; there was a tightening of her throat and chest; the breath issued out of her in hard and thick sobs; the very tissues of her overwrought being seemed to stagger. Again and again she tried to snatch a glimpse of our hero's averted eyes. She raked the mask that was his face for the relaxation of a muscle; she searched every inch of his clenched stolidity for one faint evidence of a produced effect. For all that she could read, she would have done as well to have searched the face of a wall.

She withdrew her sick eyes, and went out of the room without saying anything further. She set out for the cottage with her insurgent thoughts cooling from a white heat, and clotting into a nightmare that made a horror in her brain. It was a very dark night. There was a wet wind in it that now and then carried a thin spatter of rain. It was very mild for the time of year. She walked fast and felt a sensation of physical relief when an occasional spray of rain was dashed in her face. Her cheeks were burning with such an intensity that when

these tears out of heaven were flung upon them, an effect was made in her imagination of water hissing on the red heated surface of a cauldron.

In her heart was the clear conviction of failure, and something worse. She had staked her all; it had been swept away; and she was totally bankrupt. She had matched all she had of resolution, of mother-wit, of capacity for suffering against the unreason of this man, and he had treated them as nought. All hope of his salvation was gone—and of her own. As she took her way through the slimy purlieus of that dark evening it was an after-thought to overwhelm her. There was not a hope remaining for him, not one remaining for herself. He had rejected her most sacred entreaties; he had stood insensible to her most passionate prayers. All elementary considerations of justice, righteousness, humane policy had been swallowed in the maw of that inordinate demon that had eaten away his nature. His implacability had become inhuman. That man was perverted who cherished a resentment so monstrous at such a season in the life of himself and in the life of that he valued more.

As she walked at a furious pace to the cottage, with the gushes of rain bringing to her the only kind of relief that was possible now, a relief that was for the flesh purely, the horrified woman beheld receding backwards in front of her, step by step, into the black wall of the night simultaneously with her action of striding forward into it, a huge ungainly shape. Once before, and for an instant only, she had caught a sight of such a hideous phantom. It was in the night following her confrontation with her husband's attitude towards his daughter after her flight. This evening, however, the horror was more vivid, much more embodied. With jaunty and spasmodic gyrations it backed before her into the darkness, receding step by step, a grotesque dancing monster performing unheard-of antics, a great nameless something flapping and waving its paws. But odd and misshapen as this moving and mocking shape might be, the stoop it had in the shoulders made her think only of one. And once or twice as it emerged for a moment visible out of a wrack of fast-flying clouds and wind-shaken trees, she saw its

face. It was grinning at her in the guise of a beast's, but it was the face of Broke.

Her flesh reeled when she saw it first. She shut her eyes, and reopened them to find that this inhuman face was again blotted out by the clouds and the trees. But at the end of the avenue, in a brief interval of pasture, it was there again. It was merged almost immediately in the wall of a farm building. All the time, however, the grotesque bulk continued to mow and flop as it receded before her. Suddenly, turning a corner, the illuminated white blind of a farm-labourer's cottage flashed into view. With a piercing sense of relief she knocked at the door and was able to borrow a lantern.

With that bright talisman to bear her through the night the monstrosity before her was reduced, but nothing could make it vanish. For she had waked to a discovery. Her mate, her yokefellow, had had the mask torn off his countenance. After all these years his secret was known. He stood forth a brute in a man's shape, an ogre, a beast, a cleanly Englishman's clay inhabited by a spirit out of the Pit.

This new knowledge made her reel and moan aloud to the wind in an agony. It was driving her mad. She felt a physical loathing to spawn in her flesh. It was poisoning her nice blood. Her very arteries were growing foul and thick, and her heart could not perform its functions. She had lain on the bosom of a wild beast these many years, a wild beast formed ironically in the image of a Christian Englishman. She had been strained to its breast, and she had suckled its young. One of the breed of the monster had only that morning stripped every rag off her until her gentle body was bare, and had then fleshed its maiden claws in her. And in this first insatiate indulgence in its savageness, it could not be induced to take them forth again until the woman that had borne it promised imminently to bleed to death. Of such were the things she had nurtured with all the lavish measure of a mother's care, under the pitiable gross delusion that they were human as herself. Where was that vaunted, that inveterate wisdom that could be cheated so? Poor deluded sheep that she was, was she

not paying forfeit of her wits because the offspring which she had cherished as ewe lambs since the accursed day she brought them forth had developed the fangs and the claws, the foul nature, the inordinate bloody appetite of the damned thing that was their sire.

The horror in her brain had already caused one fact to assume an outstanding dimension. It was one that she had foreseen when she entered upon that last interview. But now the realization of it was creeping through her veins with the deadly stealth of a drug. It was convulsing her heart. They could be man and wife no more. In all that long term of their conjugal intercourse this was the first breach that had come between them. Such a pair of temperate and eminently sane persons had known how to exalt the business of living together into a symphony of companionship. Their good breeding had enabled them to draw the nicest distinctions in the art of give-and-take. As far as it is allowed for one human being to interpret another human being in terms apprehended of their common instincts, Broke and his wife had known how to do it. They had been very much to one another. They had lived in the inner paradise of a very perfect harmony. As she walked however, in this gross darkness the thirty-years wife of his bosom saw all that was past. This exquisite communion had been wrenched asunder. The same perfect loyalty of intercourse could never be again. It would be out of the question to yield that peculiar fidelity to one who had become so peremptorily embodied in her fancy as a devil. A grisly accident had pulled aside the veli. For thirty years, incredible as the fact might seem, she had been deceived by that fair, that palpable device. She would be deceived no more. And yet she might have gone to her grave in this deception had not a sardonic impulse overcome High Heaven.

mighty mother, the sacred rites began upstairs and down. Soft-footed women flitted hither and thither with flushed and grave faces. Many were the mysterious whispers that were interchanged, and many the mysterious orders given. The nurse took on the dignity of an Eastern potentate or a Teutonic king. Her nod and beck became the law of the land. The bedroom, the sitting-room and the back kitchen trembled at her eagle glance. When she lifted up her autocratic mien and snuffed the air and informed the world at large with a perfect trumpet-note of conviction "that she was sure something was scorching" her demeanour verged upon the sublime. It was not so much that a reference was conveyed to the array of shawls, blankets, long clothes, and paraphernalia of one sort and another which had been set forth on the backs of chairs in front of the fire in the little sitting-room, as the detachment of mind that was argued in one whose austere bosom could evince a perception of a mundane detail in the vortex of an event that made an epoch in the life of the species. It was as much an evidence of a vast experience, and as effectively betrayed the "Old Parliamentary Hand," as the incredible sang-froid of the late Mr. Gladstone, who was wont to startle the neophytes of the British Parliament by producing a volume of Horace from the crown of his hat at the moment an occupant of the Front Bench was apostrophising Russia and those other uttermost peoples of the world.

The female orgies continued to go on, and were carried to great lengths. Queer foods and invalid concoctions appeared on the table in the little sitting-room, and strange emblems of science as applied to medicine came on it too. The *cénacle* of women flitting round them grew even more rapt in its responsiveness to the exigencies of the moment, when first the doctor and then the nurse was seen to go upstairs with silent tread and solemn.

It happened at a time when Mrs. Broke and Delia stood a little apart in an angle formed by the wall and the chimney-piece, helping one another in the manipulation of linen, and Miss Sparrow was a few paces from them holding a saucepan of milk over the fire, that the outer

door was seen to revolve on its hinges in a manner so soundless that it looked like mystery. In the next instant the wind swept a gush of rain into the cosy room, and with it were heard obscure sounds of shuffling feet. The door was pushed open wider, and the dank figure of a man was outlined in the gloom of the threshold. The startled eyes of the witnesses peering at this strange apparition through the hardly adequate glare of the lamp and the firelight saw it to be that of a large man and burly. There was an odd stoop in his shoulders. His hair was almost white, and his face was grey.

He lurched into the room with his hands thrust out in front of him in the manner of one blinded so recently that as yet he was not grown accustomed to his affliction, or of one groping forward into a dark room to find a box of matches. But his eyes seemed to have no spark of consciousness residing therein. It was as though he neither knew where he was nor what he was about. He groped his way past the table to the most distant corner of the room, which an empty chair chanced to keep. As he shuffled towards it he looked neither to the right nor to the left. There was something eerie in the manner of his progress, its total oblivion to light and surroundings, that suggested a person walking in his sleep. There appeared not the faintest recognition in him of time and place.

The three witnesses of the apparition were separated from it by the table. Spellbound they stood to watch. They were fascinated, unable to speak or move, by the intrusion of this weird, uncanny presence. It was not until it sat down with an audible heaviness on the chair in the corner, plucked from its head the square-crowned felt hat from which the wet was running in a stream, and laid it on the floor with a purely mechanical gesture by the side of its gaiters, and proceeded then to rest its chin on a knuckle which in turn rested upon the knob of an ash stick which was borne in its hands, that the power of movement returned to the three who saw.

The old aunt was the first to recover it. She left the saucepan of milk, which was already beginning to bubble on the fire, and crept with a stealthy terror to the side of Mrs. Broke, and timidly took hold of her dress. It was

the act of a child in the nursery when it has been deluded into thinking that a bear or a giant has walked into the room. The old woman, shuddering in every vein, pressed her trembling face against the ample person of Mrs. Broke; and when of a sudden the neglected milk surged up in the saucepan and boiled over with a mighty hiss into the fire, she fastened a more convulsive clutch upon the gown of her protectress, as though the fierce sound of the milk among the cinders was the dread roaring of a beast.

Delia's act was of a different character. When by force of gazing the fact was imbrued in her numbly that the man who had groped his way into the little room was her father, she tore her eyes from his huddled shape in the very instant her senses permitted her to know that it was he, and made, with a hurry which yet had a sort of deliberation in it, past the array of shawls and blankets and infant clothing arranged still before the fire, into an even smaller apartment than this in which her father was seated, where the two maids her mother had sent from the house were fulfilling various duties.

It was a full minute before the frightened old aunt was sufficiently recovered to loosen her convulsive grip of Mrs. Broke. Even then, when ruefully she proceeded to pick the burning saucepan off the fire, she was still trembling violently. Not once as she refilled the saucepan with milk from a bowl that stood on the table did she dare to let her eyes stray in the direction of the ogre seated opposite, with his chin resting on his stick.

Nor did Mrs. Broke venture to allow her eyes to stray towards that dreadful presence. Her blood had seemed to have burst out of its vessels already. Waxing to a flood, it seemed to be flowing over and submerging her five wits.

As it roared through her ears and darkened her eyes she grew blind and deaf. She continued to stand, although bereft completely of the capacity to hear or to see. Nor could she feel anything except the phenomenon happening in herself. The five senses were whelmed in a scalding red vapour. What had happened she did not know. Involuntarily she shuttered her ineffectual eyes. Something had happened, something had occurred, but more than one

minute had to make a circuit of seconds, and be ticked out of her pulses before so much as two consecutive, two reasonably cogent thoughts could convey the dimmest sense of its nature.

Physically she was in the condition of the felon who, cut down from the gallows as dead, is in the act of being restored to life by his devoted friends. He has been cut down as dead, but with their remedies and restoratives they are forcing back the tardy blood, blackening already, along one artery at a time. The agony of resuscitation is said to be unendurable. It is said that even life itself, the most sovereign boon of any, is too dearly purchased at the price of that ineffable anguish. To be so far gone in death, and yet not to be allowed to die, is resented by nature as an interference with her first prerogative. The hapless sufferer, the instant the first black droppings begin to flow, cries aloud for death as the one solace to be rendered to his mortal throes. This wretched woman had been cut down from the tree, to all intents and purposes dead, and here was the man come to reclaim that still warm body, and in the act starts the congealed life in her afresh.

She was not to be allowed to perish, although she wished so to do, having tasted already of the ultimate sweetness of death. The very act of her passing was arrested. By the time she had acquired this first illusive, evasive instinct which made for knowledge, her shuddering form had been forced into a chair at the table littered with crockery. She rested her elbows upon it, and held the sides of her breaking head between her hands. One of her elbows rested in a bowl half full of milk, the other on a tray containing bread. The monster was there in that room, seated. How he had found his way there that night of all nights, through the rain and the darkness, was a secret in the keeping of the mocking deity who had fashioned him in the shape of a human father and husband. Doubtless it was the same deity who would not allow her now to die.

He was come to the cottage of his dead son. He was there in that room, with his guilty hands holding his chin. Would it not be in keeping with the fact to say that the pride of kindred and the passion for the land, with the aroma of a thousand years upon it, had drugged his spirit as with

a great and aged wine, and had led him, drunken and blind and staggering, through the black winter's evening, to the wind-shaken, rain-beaten threshold of that cottage door? He might well reel, well might there be no shade of comprehension in those glazed eyes, in that obscene face. The monster was drugged into a helplessness, an inanity that was even more unseemly than his native beastliness. He had come there to that little room in spite of himself, knowing nothing of his deed. He knew as much of what he was about as a caterpillar climbing a tree. Millions of generations of caterpillars had gone through that irrelevant performance in the stress of some vague instinct, and to the end of time they would continue to obey it. For no more sufficient reason was the monster sitting in that room now, with his chin upon his stick. He, no more than the caterpillar, could divorce himself from his species whether he would or no. The individual must perform the special functions of the genus.

In the midst of these contortions of her mind on that perilous and so insecure, because so indefinitely defined, border-line between sanity and chaos, the light of reason flickered now this way, now that, as though buffeted about by arid breaths out of her spirit, presently to flare up a little brighter, a little more securely, for it was suddenly nourished with the fuel of a concrete, a thoroughly comprehensible fact. Delia had quitted the room. That was a simple, lucid, definite fragment of knowledge. There was refreshment for her bewildered senses in its freedom from complexity. It was a plain fact they could understand. Delia had quitted the room; and in that act was a point-blank refusal to inhabit the same place as her father. It cost her brain no expenditure of blood and tears to acquire the key to its meaning. Such a pregnant simplicity braced her weak wits. Here at least was a matter which her reason could apprehend without incurring the danger of being overthrown in the endeavour.

She rose, and tottered into the next room, where Delia was. It caused a nerve to jump in her, as if bared suddenly to the air, to find that the face of her daughter had relapsed into that hardness which transcended even the coldness of passion which that morning had struck her to her

knees. Now, however, she had passed beyond those stages of an individual emotion, of which fear may be a phase. By now the woman and the creature were merged in the type. The labours she was called on now to undertake were as remote from the personal as those of Nature Herself. All that she felt, all that she saw, all that she did, had lost the sanction of personality, the impetus of entity. Action had been induced in her by a kind of hypnotic process, although the august power that dictated it enabled her to know what she did, even if it withheld from her the precise motive for her deeds. Very dimly, if at all, did she apprehend what ends were about to be served, or in the name of what universal principle they were undertaken. It might be said in a comparison of a thing so infinitely little with the immense, that she acted with the unreasoning rectitude of the earth in its yearly peregrination round the sun. She was one with the stars in their courses. She took her place with the miracles of the firmament in their obeisance to the awe of the universe. With space and time she was one; with Instinct she marched hand in hand to obey the dictates of Natural Law.

"Delia, I hold you to your promise."

"You must fulfil the condition under which it is to be entered upon," said Delia coldly.

"Yes, I will."

The tone had laid bare a second nerve.

She asked one of the maids to procure writing materials for her use, and while these were seeking she said to the other—

"I want you to go back to the house as quickly as you can, tell Reynolds personally to see that a good horse is put in the cart, and you are to return with him here at once."

By the time the messenger had gone on this errand writing materials had been provided for her use. Thereupon she took a seat at the table and wrote these words—"In the name of your wife I implore you to return here immediately in the company of the bearer.—Jane Sophia Broke."

As she was in the act of addressing and sealing the envelope there was a frank and almost pitying

incredulity to be seen in the face of Delia. In the interval of rather more than half an hour which elapsed before the man came with the cart, the intense silence was like a tomb. In that period not a word passed between any of the persons assembled in the two small rooms on the ground floor. That strange arrival had oppressed the atmosphere with a choking density. The knowledge that a man with a grey face was sitting in that dark corner with his chin ever resting upon his stick, arrested their voices, seemed to enfeeble their limbs. At last there was a sound of wheels without in the rain, and a little afterwards the maid, and Reynolds the coachman, came in dripping with water and blinking into the yellow glare of the room.

Mrs. Broke gave the letter to Reynolds.

"I want you to take this to the shop of Mr. Porter, the bookseller, at Cuttisham. You will find it easily—it is a small shop in North Street, a few doors out of the High Street. You are to ask for Mr. Alfred Porter, and you will give this letter personally into his hands. He will return with you here to this cottage; and, Reynolds, let me urge upon you that the matter is of grave importance."

Reynolds, bowing to these instructions, went to execute them. As he did so, the look of pity, of incredulity, was seen upon the face of Delia for the second time.

Silence descended again. Delia remained in the inner room out of the sight of her father, whose own posture had not changed. Presently Mrs. Broke ascended the stairs to the doctor and the nurse in the chamber above; and when she did so, Miss Sparrow, not daring to be left alone, deserted the utensils and the baby-linen and fled to Delia for the solace and the safety of companionship. A little afterwards Mrs. Broke came downstairs again and beckoned to the old woman, but did not speak. She then gathered the articles in front of the sitting-room fire into an armful, and carried them upstairs. The old woman followed meekly and whitely in her wake.

CHAPTER XLVIII

The Two Voices

IN the little sitting-room there succeeded another interval devoid of sound, devoid of incident. Our hero remained in the corner huddled into a grey mass, with his chin still propped on his stick. He remained motionless and alone. Not once had he changed his posture. His eyes were wide, but appeared to be glazed a faded violet colour, like those of a dog that is blind. They stared like eyes of glass out of a marble; and so intensely that a total darkness encompassed them. The sounds of a small clock ticking on the mantel-piece might have been heard distinctly, but to Broke they were not audible. They were merged in the great pulsations of his heart. Everything was very still and vague. There were occasional fierce gushes of rain driven by the wind against the window panes of the cottage. He mistook them for waves of blood breaking over the walls of his mind. Outside, in the abyss of the winter evening, there was not a star. There was nothing, not so much as a dark pool of water or the shadow of a gaunt tree, by which time and place could be identified. The night was a void, but one hardly so great as that of the spirit of the man who sat in the corner of the bright and small room with his chin on his stick. Time and place had even less of embodiment in *him*. He might be on earth, a withered oak tree, a fallen leaf, a blade of grass bruised to death by the hand of winter; or he might be in space, a disembodied spirit wafted to Elysium along the clouds of eternity. There

was not a shade of recognition remaining to him that he could surrender to his own sense of entity. He had no familiar evidence of life, hardly of being. He was a nebulous mechanism, whose brain was a sea, whose clay was a fire; an impotent mechanism compounded mysteriously, irrelevantly, of the two prime elements, wrought with mystery equal and irrelevance no less, into a crude symbol or body whose end and beginning was darkness and matter. Beyond that elemental knowledge there was nothing to know.

Suddenly a far-off noise was heard to tintinnabulate faintly in some remote purlieu of his spirit. It surmounted the ticking of the clock, it surmounted the great pulsations of his heart, it surmounted the spatter of the rain against the windows and the sounds of the blood breaking over the walls of his mind. It was a wail, as of a wind drawn painfully fine, a wind crooning away from the very outer verge of eternity. It was as faint as if it had crept many thousands of miles across the sterile wastes of space. It rose and fell, but repetition did not make it more intimate. It was unreal, eerie, and monotonous; it made an effect of unreason in a condition of exquisite sanity. As this faint voice continued to issue from the back of the infinite, yet came no nearer into human ken, it acquired a certain quality. Its reason to be grew no more determinate, yet it conferred supernatural powers. Some grotesque idea of being, of self-recognition sprang directly out of the weirdness of it. Time and space became possible; a little afterwards external things were shadowed forth. A dull disc of yellow appeared in front of his eyes. At first he thought it was the moon, but it seemed too bright; and then the sun, but it did not seem bright enough. He then awoke with a start to the fact that it was a lamp on a table. He grasped the knowledge that he was sitting in a room. Soon it became apparent that the illusion he had experienced of a disembodied spirit reclining upon a cloud had been produced by his chin resting upon his stick.

It was now that an element of frank and broad farce was introduced into his frantic endeavour to wrest out

of the inner tribunal a re-recognition of his own entity. The thin voice that had at first rendered it possible had been weird and eerie, and not unsolemn: such was its suggestion of having journeyed long through time and travelled far. But here there started up a competing voice that was neither weird nor solemn. It was ridiculous. It would not be tolerated in a harlequinade. It was the lusty crying of a child.

At such a moment a voice of that kind was indescribably ludicrous. That perfectly robust, that absolutely common and lucid sound in conjunction with the thin voice right away from the outer verge of eternity was really too incongruous for human reason to accept. It was altogether beyond bathos, it was mockery. It was a damnable paradox invented by a devil to affront a logical and delicate human ear. It was like some topsy-turvy conceit in a nightmare. Reason shied at it with a positive sense of affront. However, no protest from that source could allay the incongruous duet. The wail still rose and fell, and crooned in mid-air over the fields of eternity. The infant still cried lustily from some station more adjacent to his outraged ears. Under this distressing sense of the ridiculous, our hero made a more frantic effort to re-capture his wits. He was conscious of their effort to pass the yellow disc of the lamplight, as is a sleeper who struggles to awake in the midst of foul dreams. Presently he could make out his wife beyond it, seated in shadow. She had a bundle in her arms.

The sight of her, however, did nothing to assuage his torment. The desperate duet went on. It grew more intolerable as it proceeded. One noise, certainly the more human, the more natural, proceeded from the bundle his wife held in her arms. It was shrill, lusty, disconcerting, but at least it was of a reasonable and consecutive character. But why it should pit itself against the other sound he did not know. The effect of them in chorus was not to be borne. He must stuff his ears. The endurance of no human person could sanction such an incongruity. If that menace to nature went on much longer he felt he must go mad.

One without the other was monstrous; blended and in chorus they made an effect horrible beyond belief.

Do what he would, however, the two voices continued to make his reason totter. There was something disgusting in that high and thin wail that had struck the first effect of unreason in him, which yet so paradoxically had summoned him back to sanity. It was not to be compared to anything in earth or heaven. It had an analogy to winds far off, rippling the branches of the eerie forests of the moon. It was like a mild little voice hanging in mid air, a dryad mourning. Now and then the note had something in common with the cry of an animal. And yet in reality it could not have been identified by any of these too definite descriptions. For the prevailing quality in it was something metallic, something mechanical, that invested the very centre of these cadences: an ordered recurrence, a regulated coming and going, a rising and falling, an incredibly even repetition of its timbre that had nothing in common with the human, the divine, the natural, nor the supernatural, so far as the senses of man had been evolved to apprehend them.

Broke's bleeding nerves recoiled from it in horror again and again.

"It is like a damned machine!" they seemed to complain to one another. "It is like a damned machine!"

CHAPTER XLIX

The Survival of the Fittest: the Curtain falls

THAT indeed was the only thing it could be said to resemble. It was a piece of diabolical clockwork. The winds of the night escaping out of chaos to complain among willows was not more eerie. It was an elaborate yet brutal sequence of discords, a symphony of music as they might understand it in hell. All the time it continued to come and go, to occur and recur with a precision and an equal volume of sound that was frightful in its regularity. But remote as it was it could compete with the most adjacent, the most insistent of noises. The bundle in his wife's arms emitted high and natural infant cries; but near and clear as they were they could not drown those weaker sounds that were so far away.

The duet between the two voices went on and on. Broke had again ceased to be conscious of anything, save the diabolical fashion of their blending. It grew higher and higher; it rose more imperious; but the thinner note was ever dominant. After a time the nearer one grew less. The human cries from the bundle subsided into a troubled exhaustion. Languorous sobs were shaken among and dispersed in the strident outcry; gradually it grew intermittent; presently it ceased. The unholy wail suspended in the firmament had nothing then to dispute its ascendency. Again he had the desire to crush his hands into his quaking ears. His nerves were bleeding to death. The trick that the arch-fiend had put upon him was sending him out of his

mind. He could hardly sit in his chair. At last he could endure it no more. He jerked up his head in the startled manner of a stag drinking at a pool when it first hears the sound of dogs.

"What is that noise?" he demanded imperiously.

"That is the mother."

The reply caused a faint streak of knowledge to break over his face. His hands froze tighter to the knob of his stick, and on it he settled his chin more firmly. The haggard sweat poured down his cheeks in a stream.

The nurse came down the stairs softly. Mrs. Broke gave the stupefied bundle of life into her arms. As she did so the nurse pulled down the corner of her lips dolefully.

"Poor young lady!" she whispered hoarsely.

"Hush!" said Mrs. Broke.

Tears gathered one at a time in the hardened eyes of the nurse.

At this moment the sounds of wheels were again heard outside in the rain. Mrs. Broke raised her head and stood erect. Her form was strung as tense as an arrow taut on the string. Her listening ears could detect, even through the tumult of the night, the creakings of a vehicle as it drew up at the gate of the little garden. She strained to catch a footfall on the gravel path. The old faintly ironical smile flitted round her tight lips for an instant, but in the next her face had become resolved into much the same condition as that of Broke's. Under the lamp the sweat shone livid. She moved to the door and opened it. A spatter of rain simmered upon her face suddenly as in the case of a few hours before, but the engines of her heart no longer required it for refreshment. There was a supreme exaltation in her. She stood bareheaded to shade with her hand the rain and the gross darkness from her eyes and peered out into the storm to discern the outlines of the form she had come to seek.

She called the man's name softly, but there came no response. It was too dark to make out what was at the bottom of the garden. There was not a sound except the patter of the rain and the mournful noise of the wind sobbing in the upper branches of the wood behind and above the

cottage. She continued to stand in a posture of expectancy, but no form appeared before her on the garden path. She called the man's name, but she stood alone. Unquestionably she had heard the sound of wheels. That blunt fact dominated her like a passion as she stood looking out upon the void. Her being could admit no other. She continued to stand with the rain beating upon her pitilessly. She did not quail before it, nor when the wind cast it more fiercely in her teeth, or struck her bosom, did she recoil or gasp for breath. Her eyes began to ache with the darkness. And yet she was as sure she had heard the sound of wheels as that the man she had sent for would appear.

At last the wind carried towards her the sound of the gravel crunching. A foot had fallen on it. Almost directly a vague mass was evolved out of the night and the flood. It climbed up the path to confront the woman on the threshold. It was a man with his great coat turned up to his ears, and the peak of his cap pulled down over his face until only the tips of his chin and nose were to be seen. He was as gaunt as a drenched sparrow, the water dripping from his shoulders.

"I knew you would come," the woman breathed softly.

"I couldn't find the gate in the darkness. And the rain and wind are horrible."

She hastened to lead him in and close the door, for every moment the wind was threatening to extinguish the lamp on the table. As the man moved into the light, and stood blinking and wiping his feet on the mat, he said—

"I am afraid I am bringing mud and wet into this cosy room."

He took off his cap, and his eyes fell on the nurse, who was rocking the infant in her arms, with an occasional tear dripping from her eyes on to the blanket that contained it.

Mrs. Broke conducted him past her to where Delia was seated in the room adjoining. In his progress he did not appear to notice that a grey huddle of a man was in the farthest corner of the room through which he passed.

Upon his entrance Delia rose.

The man did not look at her.

Mrs. Broke closed the door that communicated with the other room.

"You must take off your wet overcoat," she said.

"Thank you, I will."

Delia helped him to remove it. She was very cold, her face was the colour of snow. During the moment in which she tendered her aid it changed to scarlet, and then to snow again. An intense bewilderment was making her eyes grow dark. The man did not look at her once, although there was an instant in which he took her arm in a grip that had a slightly authoritative caress in it.

"Won't you sit down?" said Mrs. Broke.

"No, thank you; I think not."

She found that his voice and the measure of his self-effacement were making her strong. They had seemed to banish any suggestion of abnormality in their meeting.

"I must first make the purpose clear for which I sent for you this evening. But before I do so, I render you my thanks for obeying the summons. I content myself with saying that had I not come to form the highest estimate of your nature that one person can form of another's, I could not have issued it. I could not have dared."

The man bent his face a little. A slight look of pain showed upon it.

"My object in summoning you to-night is that you may undertake the task of reconciling a father and daughter. It is by you alone that it can be done. The grave crime that was committed against you, your wife finds impossible to forgive. But at the entreaty of her mother, made upon her knees, she has consented to make your perfect magnanimity the sole condition of her forgiveness of the author of it. You have only to withhold it; you have only to insert one reservation in its absolute fulness and they can never be reconciled. There is no power in the world that can reconcile them if you elect to nurse for an instant one spark of your resentment. If you are incapable of this act of fortitude I shall not respect you less; if the triumph is yours of achieving

it, I can only marvel at you more. Perhaps I have no right to ask it; perhaps it is more than one person should ask of another. But as a wife and a mother I ask it, and venture to do so because all requests preferred from those sources are privileged. I ask it in the name of the children that may one day be yours. As an old and poor woman who has borne many, I ask it on my knees."

In this appeal there was a singular simpleness, an abasement which was so complete that it encroached on the primitive dignity of nature. Without venturing to look at the countenance of him to whom it was made, the unhappy woman covered her face with her hands. There was an instant of silence, in which she seemed to shrink into herself, in which her heaving sides seemed to contract.

In the next the man had laid his hand on her shoulder with a gentleness that was extraordinary.

"Yes, yes, I think I see."

"You will lead her to her father literally, in your own person."

"As you wish."

A slightly bleak smile twisted his face.

The woman was heard to breathe heavily.

"A man. I hear the voice of a man. A man speaks!"

As she uttered these irrelevant words she raised his hand in both her own, and it felt the strange fervour of her lips. A single tear out of her eyes fell upon it.

In the next moment she had gone back to the other room. Broke still kept the attitude he had occupied ever since he had come there. The sweat was still running down his face in a stream. To the grey of his cheeks had succeeded the pallor of death. The nurse sat at the side of the fire rocking the quiescent child in her arms. The wail upstairs had ceased. The doctor was seen descending the stairs. When he reached the room his rough face was observed to be very grave and composed. He came softly to the side of Mrs. Broke.

"All is over," he said in her ear.

Mrs. Broke held her heart.

The doctor turned to the infant sleeping in the arms of the nurse. He pulled the blanket aside and favoured it with a cursory professional glance.

"A fine boy," he said.

His comment awoke no echo of response in the stony woman shivering by his side. His eyes went across the table to where Broke huddled with his chin resting on his stick.

"Ha! there is the grandfather! Does he know?"

"Tell him," said the unhappy woman.

The doctor turned towards our hero.

"A fine boy, Mr. Broke," he said with a native heartiness in his voice.

The direct manner of this address did something to lift our hero from his stupor. For the first time he took his head out of his hands, and in the act the stick fell with a clatter to the ground.

"A fine boy," repeated the doctor in his bluff voice.

"Eh?" said Broke.

He spoke in hoarse bewilderment. There seemed to be some kind of significance in the words of the doctor, but he knew not what.

"A fine boy," said the doctor yet again, and a little proudly. "It is a strange providence that watches over you old families, don't you think?"

No glimmer of comprehension appeared in the stark eyes of the grandfather. They were stretched dully upon the lamp. The sweat still poured down his face.

"The noise," he was heard to mutter. "The noise. Why has it stopped?"

"We couldn't save her."

"Hey!" said Broke. He was seen to place a hand behind his ear and to bend it forward in the feebly querulous manner of a very aged man who is deaf.

The doctor repeated his phrase.

"I don't understand," said Broke feebly. "Why—what? I—I want to know about that noise."

"I cannot recall a more painful or difficult case in my experience. The premonition she had taken of her husband's death proved too much for us. It gave us no chance."

A vague comprehension was seen to creep into the grey face of the grandfather. His trunk was suddenly shaken and convulsed. His wife lifted the bundle out of the

arms of the nurse. She bore it to his side. Mutely he put up his piteous face to hers.

"Edmund," she said, calling him by his name.

The sound of the familiar calm voice was a never-failing source of strength and consolation to him. It was so now. Something of the stupor was banished from his spirit, something of the palsy was taken from his blood. He extended both arms towards his wife with the eagerness of one who thirsts. She tucked the sleeping fragment of life firmly within them. He gathered it slowly on to his irresolute knees.

She then withdrew with great swiftness to the room adjoining.

"Now!" she breathed from the threshold.

They were both sitting side by side at the table, but at the summons the man rose to his feet immediately. Delia followed his action with dumb, terrified, disbelieving eyes.

"Come, child."

He was seen to raise her softly by the arm. Taking her then by the hand he led the way into the other room. She yielded to him meekly but with terror and incredulity ever increasing in her face. They discovered Broke in the corner with a shapeless mass of blanket on his knee. His face was hardly recognisable, it was so wet and grey. He lifted it at the approach of his daughter and her husband. He had expected to see his wife. A look of bewilderment, similar to that in the eyes of his daughter, came upon him for an instant, but it passed almost at once. It was succeeded by an expression that was incomprehensible, that had no meaning. His mouth grew loose and weak. His right arm tightened about the precious burden it encompassed. Suddenly his left was seen to be extended. At the same instant a harrowing agony seemed to spread over and shatter his limbs.

Without hesitation the man led Delia by the hand directly to the place where our hero's were outstretched to accept her. But even when conducted there, and she was released from his grasp, the power was not in her to yield forth her hand to receive that other. She stood

before it mute. Her companion seized her hand again, and placed the limp thing in that which was yet outstretched to take it. A curious weakness of its pressure caused her to submit. Her companion stepped back quickly into the room from which he had come and closed the door, leaving Mrs. Broke alone to stand and gaze from her station at the opposite side of the table with eyes that were going blind.

Upstairs sat the old woman by the side of the bed, desolate and without tears, nursing the dead hand of her niece. Downstairs sat our hero clasping his man-child with one arm, with the other his daughter. The haggard sweat poured down his face unceasingly.

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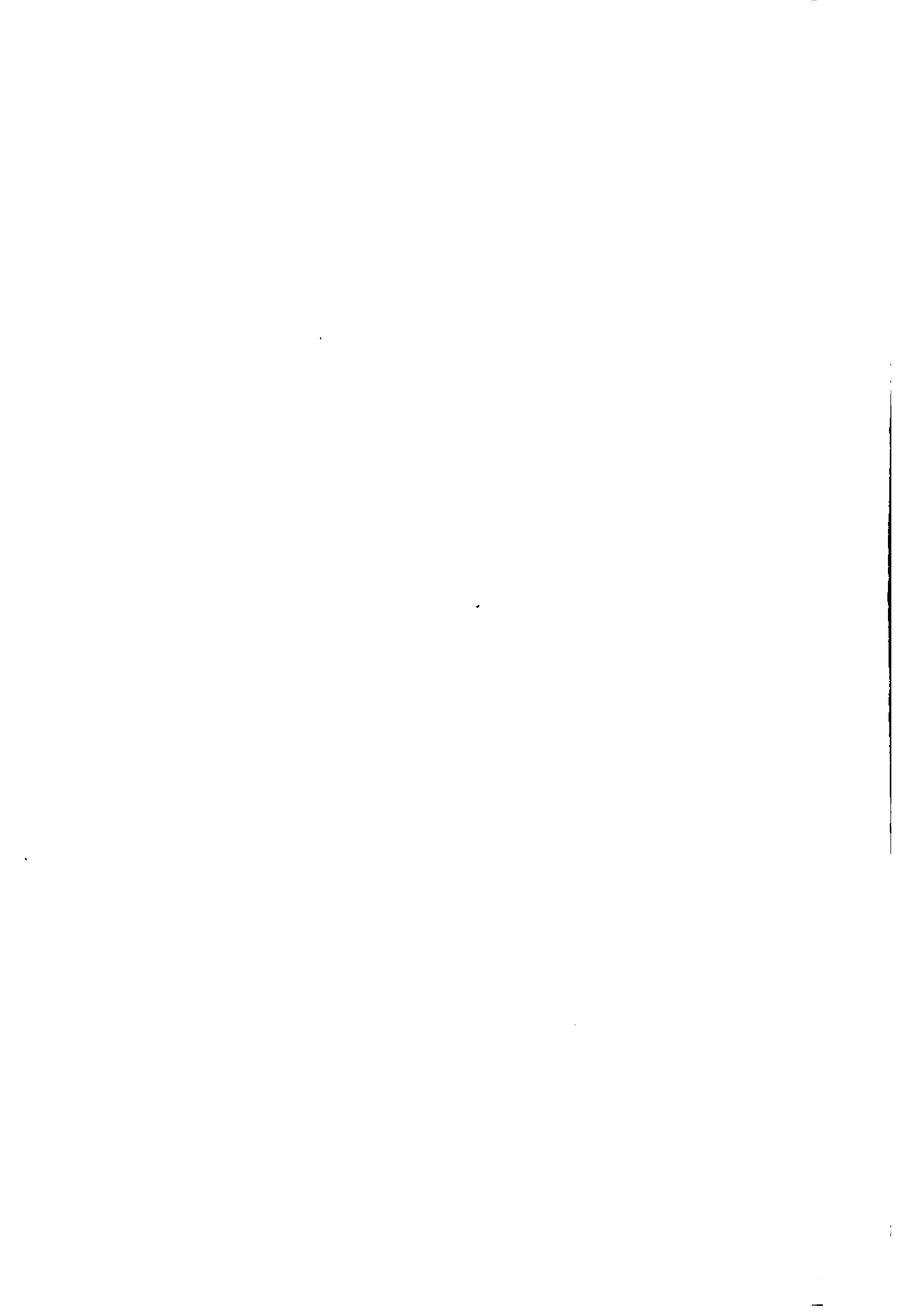

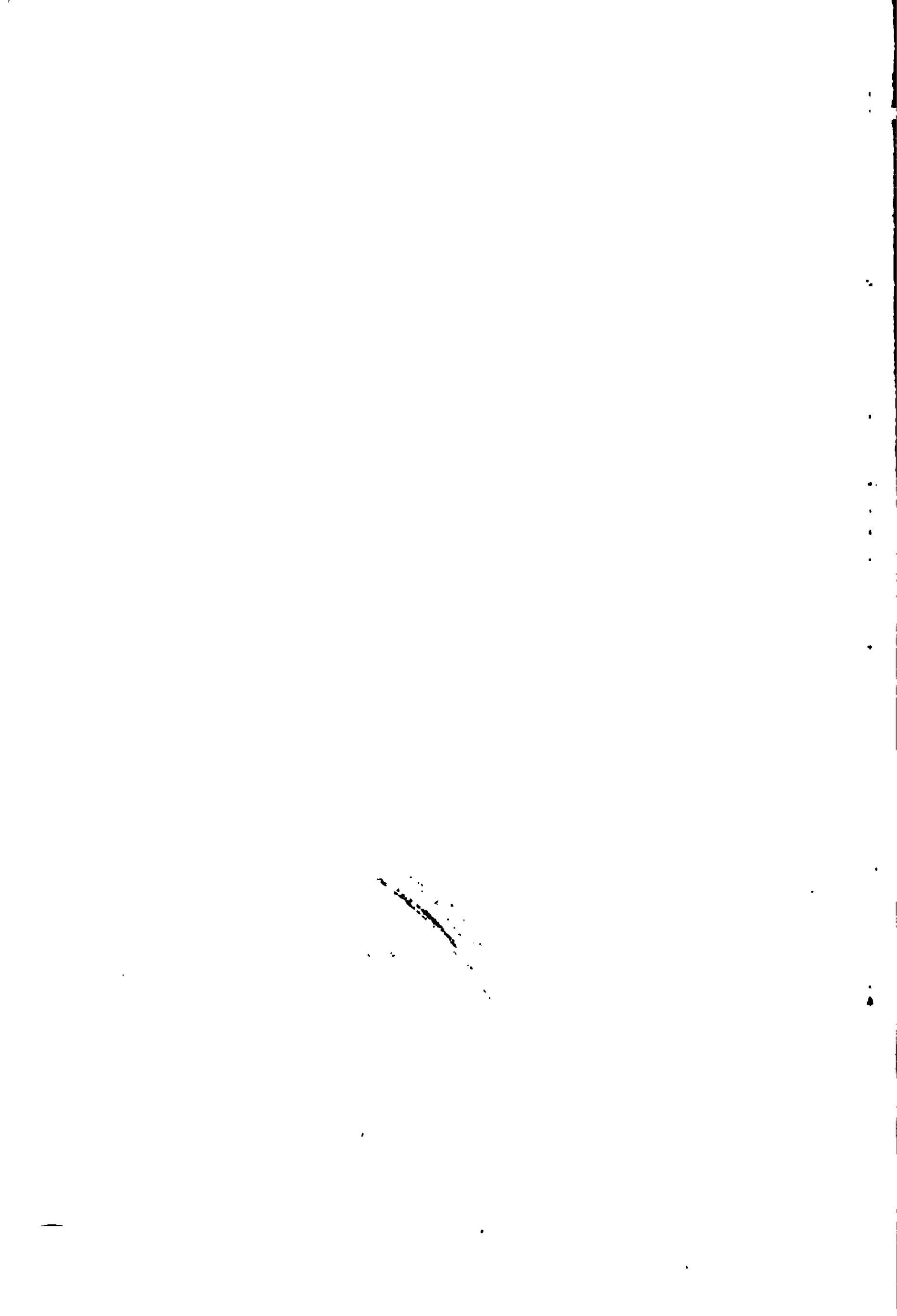

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